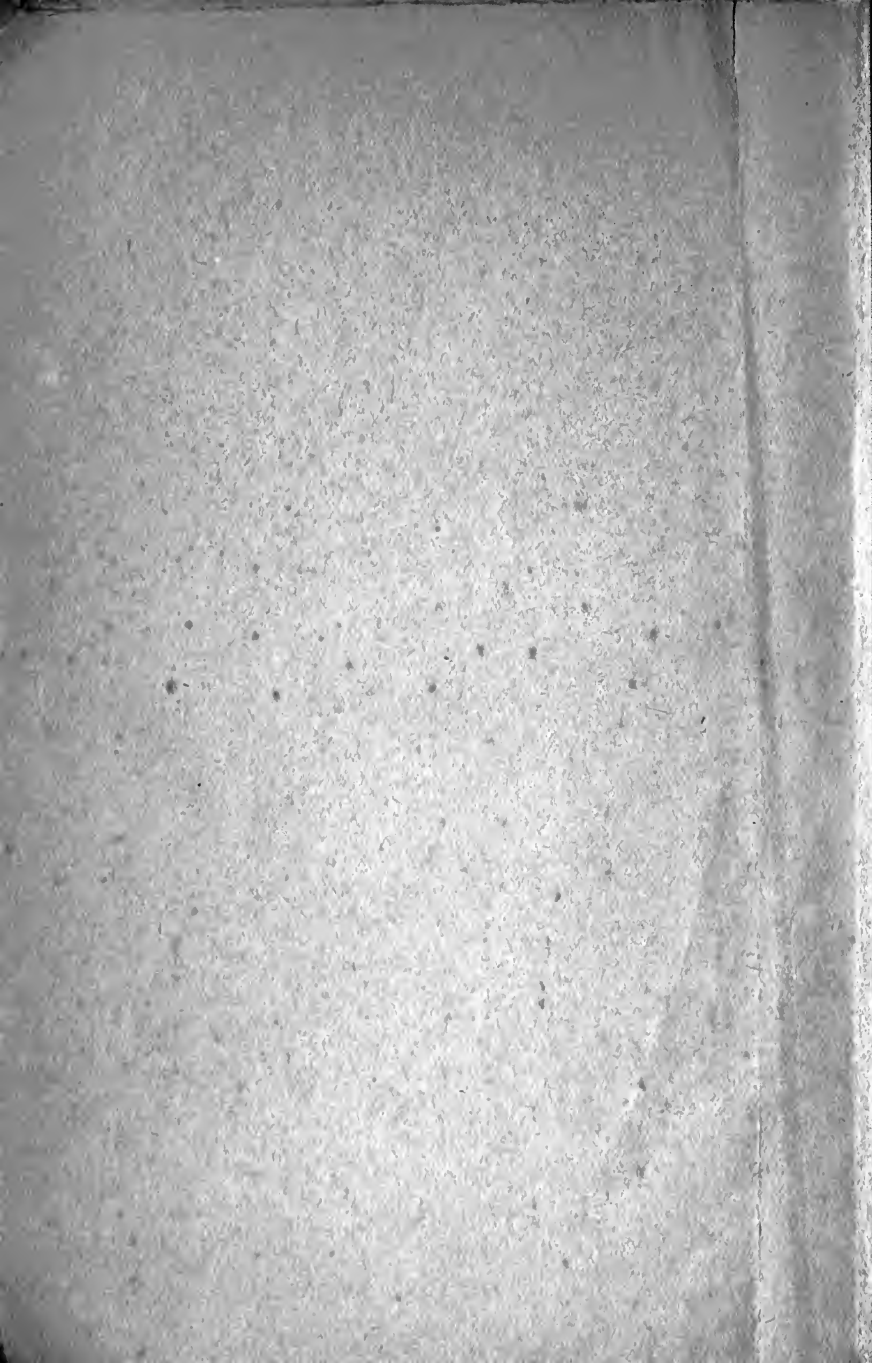


THE BURLEIGH MURDERS

GUY MORTON



THE BURLEIGH MURDERS

We have few authors on our fiction list possessed with the same gift of analysis into human character and motive as Mr. Morton. Indeed, nothing pleases him more than to play one type of individual against another, and since their actions culminate, as a rule, in deeds of violence, the author is never lacking either in material or scope for his own peculiar abilities. When, therefore, Mr. Morton turns his attentions to a rather mixed gathering at The Briars, a pleasantly situated country-house, the reader is entitled to expect some startling disclosures. Nor does he find himself disappointed. Two murders, each of great brutality, take place in rapid succession, and the perpetrator, obviously one who has little to learn either in the art of concealment or dissimulation, effectively side-tracks the police from the vital issues and appears to rest securely behind the cloak of their incompetence. But whoever committed the crime completely under-estimated the talents of the ever vigilant Amor Kairns, who finally brings the criminal to book in an extremely dramatic quick curtain.

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by
GUY MORTON

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The Burleigh Murders

CHAPTER I

FROM the moment the newspapers carried the first announcement that there had been a murder at the summer home of Mrs. Ashley Madden, the public reaction was peculiar. Speaking roughly, there was a general air of scoffing. The great mass, to whom the name of Mrs. Ashley Madden was familiar, were inclined to look at it askance, to shrug their shoulders, and ask themselves, "What next?"

Yet the noon editions of the Ridgeport papers carried the announcement quite plainly.

Captain Mulvaney was forced to concede the point, as he pondered the despatch which had evidently been wired from the village of Burleigh.

The Captain knew, broadly, that Burleigh was some fifty or so miles distant from Ridgeport, that it was off all the beaten highways, and that—according to newspaper statements of many months previous—it had been chosen by Mrs. Madden as the site for a summer home because of its remoteness.

"What do you make of it?" Mulvaney almost snapped, as he tossed the paper across his desk towards Amor Cairns.

The latter was not precisely a part of the police force of Ridgeport. He was, more nearly, an acquisition of Captain Mulvaney's, who came and went as he pleased, but who quite often had the peculiar knack of being at the right spot when crime broke out in some new guise. He was, in other words, a free-lance who placed himself occasionally at Mulvaney's disposal, and who, because of such action, had contributed greatly to the reputation which Mulvaney had acquired during recent years.

Kairns, abnormally tall and lean, with keen dark eyes, was draped over or around the only really comfortable chair in Mulvaney's office. He did little more than glance at the paper which the Captain tossed in his general direction.

"You should not be hasty in your judgments, Captain," he observed. "That, I fear, Captain, is your greatest fault. You have the knack—almost uncanny, I would call it—of leaping swiftly towards conclusions and alighting, possibly, upon your feet, but not upon sound logic."

"Well, confound it all, Amor, you know what I mean!" Mulvaney was inclined to storm. "Not that it is any affair of mine—or wouldn't be if the Burleigh police hadn't called the office. . . . But you know how it is with that woman."

"Precisely," Kairns agreed. "With that woman."

For *that* woman was none other than *the* Mrs. Ashley Madden whose name had been blazoned over the front pages of newspapers from coast to coast for a dozen years or more. Except that during the past two or three years the blazing had been much less pronounced—in fact, almost restrained.

Mrs. Ashley Madden was one of those odd fragments of humanity who have a strange flair for publicity, though many had long since been defining it as a consuming passion. Mrs. Madden, personally, put it down as a burning desire to serve mankind. At least, that was her particular phrase during the early years when she was battling her way to the front-page headlines in the role of a crusading evangelist. For years Mrs. Madden waged war against sin in its various forms, yet at times her exploits were stripped so close to the bare hide that the fine art of her publicity agent seemed almost grim in its crudity. But Mrs. Madden fought on until coarse laughter began to greet her, and until the headlines—though still on the front page—became extremely doubtful tributes to her crusading spirit.

As the world changed, Mrs. Madden changed with it—though she was not Mrs. Ashley Madden in those days.

For she was versatile in names as in most other matters. There was a time, during the early stages of her mad race through marriage and divorce, when her sudden shift from the career of the crusading evangelist won the front-page headlines which had been beginning to weaken under her. But at the moment the details of the marriage race do not matter, except that Madden chanced to be the last name acquired. It was taken on at approximately the time she founded a nudist colony in Florida, though naturally before that there were other ventures which reached out eagerly for the limelight.

Sometimes the ventures succeeded for a time; they caught the passing fancy of the fickle public, then they faded and were swallowed up in the mad surge of events. There was a flurry of newspaper streamers and banners when she opened a night-club in New York and clashed with the police in the first forty-eight hours. There were flaming photographs when she attempted to lead street riots in the coal towns; but, queerly enough, her campaign to win the governorship of the State of Kansas created barely a ripple—though it must be confessed that her slogan of "Follow me back to simple ways" was probably the most novel during that particular year of campaigning.

"A publicity hound," Mulvaney ragged at the newspaper. "That's what I'd call her, Amor. You got anything to say on the lady's behalf?"

Amos Kairns waved a hand gently.

"And yet," said Mulvaney, "this dashed paper says, plain as words can put it, that somebody has been murdered at the woman's summer home. If our office hadn't had a call from Burleigh I'd say the woman had gone on a publicity rampage again. I wonder if she has."

Mulvaney became speculative.

"They're sort of simple folks down Burleigh way," he said. "I suppose a shrewd old fox like that Madden girl could make the local police think there had been a murder. Later they could find out it was all a mistake—but she'd have her publicity just the same. Damn such

women, Amor! But the country's full of them, except that few have the brains or the nerve to put anything over. Now, I wonder!"

Kairns conceded the point with an airy wave of the hand, and he seemed more interested in studying Mulvaney than in absorbing the few points which the noon editions had brought out. Mulvaney was the aggressive sort who had hammered his way from the ranks, and just now he seemed to be caught between the desire for action and a positive distaste for Mrs. Ashley Madden. Kairns was inclined to sum up the latter sentiment as one of Mulvaney's weaknesses. It was not that he had any sympathy for the publicity fiends who tormented the nation and who goaded countless thousands of others on in the insane race for a fleeting second of the spotlight; but it was rather that he felt Mulvaney was already, and even at this distance, forming conclusions which probably had little basis in fact.

"If that mad woman and her crazy husbands are staging another grab for notoriety, I'd like to have a hand in it," Mulvaney exploded suddenly, quite in line with Kairns' thought. "You know, Amor, the newspapers of this country make a tremendous mistake. They let themselves be gulled into giving their space to people who should be in madhouses. Now look at that woman. If they had ducked her in the frog-pond about ten years ago, and held her there until it took six doctors to bring her round, they would have been doing something——"

"My dear Mulvaney," Kairns interrupted mildly, "you forget you are speaking of one of our national idols—or, rather, of one of our idols of the past. We delight to worship at the feet of such heroines. . . . And that reminds me. When do we start?"

"Huh! What's that? Who said we were starting at all?"

"Nobody. Rather, nothing except your attitude."

Mulvaney grinned.

"The Chief says for us to start as soon as we can make it"—his tone was a half-apology—"so the car will be

round at your flat in an hour, if that suits. But mind you, Amor, I didn't ask for the job; but the Chief knows Thompson personally—you know, Thompson down at Burleigh—and while he says Thompson was never particularly bright, he at least thinks the man would know if there had actually been a murder."

That was another point which Kairns was ready to concede. A late edition, which caught the street just as they were leaving Ridgeport, supplied some suggestion of information regarding the affairs at Burleigh. But even so there was a surprising lack of detail. That mere shortcoming indicated that possibly Mulvaney had not been entirely fair to the newspapers. For there seemed to be a positive unwillingness on the part of Ridgeport papers to give Mrs. Ashley Madden anything approaching her old level of publicity. At the back of a few skimpy details there was evidence of newspaper caution. But there was, at the same time, almost an unspoken hope that the early information might be supported by fact and that the way might be opening to provide Mrs. Madden with her dues.

"You can see the papers don't believe a dashed word of it all," Mulvaney grumbled, after Kairns had read the despatches aloud while the former sat at the wheel. "They think the old girl is trying to spring another publicity racket; but if she is, may the Lord help her this time! Her day in the limelight has run down."

It appeared that Mulvaney might not be far wrong on that particular point. For the scoffing showed in the newspaper headings rather than in the body of the reading matter. One went so far as to insert a question-mark after the word "murder". Another used the following as a headline: "It must be a murder, since the body has been found."

That provided Mulvaney with so much satisfaction that he speeded up his driving.

"All I've got to say," he observed, "is that if our dear Mrs. Ashley Madden has pulled another fast one she is just going to find out for the first time the difference between

publicity and notoriety, though I don't claim it will be easy to force the distinction through her hard shell."

"My dear Mulvaney!" Kairns interjected; and it was the tone, rather than the words, which suggested that Captain Mulvaney had been taking liberties with a one-time public shrine.

The newspaper details, worded with extreme caution and limited to the least possible space, supplied the information that a body had been found in the billiard-room of Mrs. Ashley Madden's summer home; that, for the moment, no person appeared to know just who was the dead man other than that the name was Roger Hamstead—who seemed to have nothing whatever to do with Mrs. Madden or her summer home; and that the police had acted with great despatch.

"That's not telling us much," Mulvaney granted, when Kairns brought up the point. "But I don't mind saying I had Thompson on the line while I was waiting for the car, and he told me something. About all I can say is that if Thompson hasn't got his lines crossed, then Mrs. Madden has a dashed smart butler . . . smart, or something else."

"Yes?" Kairns encouraged.

"Thompson told me over long-distance—but mind you, I'm only passing it along for what he said—that it was the butler who found the body in the billiard-room this morning, and that he instantly locked the door and windows and communicated with the police before notifying the household. That, Amor, is dashed clever work for a butler—or did I hear you say something?"

"I doubt it, Captain."

"Doubt what? That the butler is clever, or that you said something?"

Kairns laughed.

"That I said something," he returned. "But I was thinking at the same time how the situation must be irritating you. For already Mrs. Madden seems to be getting a break of luck. We practically don't know a thing about it yet, but already we have encountered two

intriguing points : first, that no person appears to know the dead man ; and second, that the butler is—what should we say?—abnormally clever. It would be a queer fling of fate if Mrs. Madden, who has fought so bitterly for years for the spotlight, should now have run into a natural mystery.”

The police force of Burleigh, it became apparent shortly after their arrival, was a one-man affair. Sam Thompson was it. But Burleigh possessed pride and a sense of its responsibility—or Thompson had influence. For it was announced almost immediately that there had been a special meeting of the council early in the forenoon, and they had appointed some individual known as Edger as Thompson’s assistant in order, as Thompson expressed it, that he might be left free for emergency duties. Whether or no Burleigh expected some emergency greater than murder was not entirely clear ; for, upon the arrival of Mulvaney and Cairns, Chief Thompson was occupying his office—a room in a three-roomed building which seemed devoted to police headquarters, fire-hall, and public library. Edger, it developed, was on guard at The Briars, Mrs. Ashley Madden’s summer home.

Early impressions are not always accurate, but it appeared that Chief Thompson was as greatly awed by the murder as the village of Burleigh was awed by the presence of Mrs. Madden in its midst. He seemed a typical village character whose chief duties were given over to the conduct of a general store next door to police headquarters but who, now that murder had fallen upon them, had donned his police uniform and appeared ill at ease in the face of the abnormal. The warmth with which he greeted them suggested the feeling of relief which he experienced at their arrival.

“I can’t say that I’m used to this sort of thing,” he said as he mopped his brow, though the day was far from sultry. “But you know how it is in a place of this kind, Captain. We get sort of disorganized when anything like this happens, but I’ve held things together as best

I could. . . . Now, don't go bothering me now, Mamie. Can't you see the gentlemen from the city have arrived?"

The latter remark was directed at a woman who thrust part of her head through the doorway.

"But I can't help it, Sam," said the woman addressed as Mamie, as her body followed the head through the doorway. "I've just got to tell you something, thinking maybe both you and the gentlemen ought to know."

The woman—a rather shrewd-faced individual—was interested in Captain Mulvaney and Amor Kairns, though she attempted to treat their presence as a normal part of existence.

"All right, Mamie," Chief Thompson conceded. "If you've got to come in, I suppose you have; but I wish you'd leave things till later. Gentlemen, this is Miss Mamie Fargo. Now, what is it, Mamie?"

"I'm sorry, Chief, to break into your talk in this manner," said Miss Fargo, who failed to show any outward signs of regret; "but seeing I'm such friends with Dr. Thorley, I thought you wouldn't mind. Besides, you ought to know. The revolver has been found, Sam."

"Now, Mamie! You don't say!"

"But I do say, Sam. Mrs. Baxter's boy, Ted, found it on his way to school after lunch—though maybe it isn't the right revolver at all. But what I mean is that a revolver has been found, and I thought you ought to know. Ted was late for school, Sam; and when Miss Jenkins twitted him about it, he up and told her that he had been prowling round that bit of woods near The Briars, when what should he find but a revolver."

"Well, now, Mamie!"

Chief Thompson seemed overwhelmed by the information.

"Well, now!" he repeated; then finally he gained a better grip on himself. "You say it's the revolver they used to murder Mr. Hamstead?"

"No, Sam, I didn't say that at all. But Miss Jenkins did tell Dr. Thorley over the telephone that it might have been

the revolver, that only one shot had been fired out of it, and that——”

“Told Dr. Thorley?” Chief Thompson was recovering rapidly. “Why the hell . . . Pardon me, Mamie. . . . I mean, why the blazes didn’t Miss Jenkins telephone me? Who is police of this town, anyway?”

Miss Mamie Fargo did not appear above absorbing some relish from the situation. Her shrewd eyes took on new lights, and as she nodded her grey head it was apparent that murder has its various reflexes and that all the ripples which it creates do not speak of grief and broken hearts.

“You are, of course, Sam,” Miss Fargo soothed. “But you know how it is, Sam. Miss Jenkins did telephone to you—rather, she tried to telephone, just as soon as she got the revolver away from Mrs. Baxter’s Ted—but Mrs. Thompson said you were taking an after-dinner nap——”

“All right, Mamie,” Chief Thompson interrupted hurriedly; “we’ll go into that later. Miss Jenkins did the right thing by telephoning Dr. Thorley.” Then, to Captain Mulvaney, “The doctor is the coroner. He is the one I got to examine the body. I’ve had a busy morning, that’s what I’ve had. Thank you, Mamie.”

Miss Fargo retreated, though slowly. It was evident that she would recognize Captain Mulvaney and Amor Cairns the next time she met them. Thompson followed her retreat with a scowl.

“That woman’s got a tongue in her head,” he said testily. “But that’s one thing settled. We know about the revolver now. I was beginning to think . . . Now, what’s that?”

Miss Mamie Fargo’s head reappeared in the doorway.

“I forgot to tell you, Sam,” she said pleasantly, and also with evident relish, “that there’s markings on the revolver. It shouldn’t be difficult to trace.”

“Now, why didn’t I think of that?” Thompson asked peevishly. “But I’ve been so busy all day I haven’t had a moment to think. What are the markings, Mamie?”

“Miss Jenkins didn’t say. And I think it frightfully

careless of Dr. Thorley not to have found out. I telephoned Miss Jenkins right away, but the principal wouldn't let her come to the telephone—he said she was busy with a class; so we don't know anything about it, Sam."

Miss Fargo appeared disappointed. So did Chief Thompson. Eventually the lady left, with a rather pert glance at Captain Mulvaney; and Thompson went and stood in the doorway as though he feared another return.

"I expect the whole town'll know all about it in half an hour," he observed gloomily. "Yes, she's stopped in front of the post-officé, and there's always somebody there. Always."

Chief Thompson returned to his desk and sat down heavily, as though much of his responsibility were ended.

"So there actually has been a murder?" Mulvaney asked. "You know, Chief, we were beginning to doubt it . . . with that woman up at The Briars."

"Yes," Thompson granted, "there's been a murder. I mean, Phipps says it's a murder."

"Phipps?" Mulvaney became more interested. "Who is Phipps?"

"The manservant up at The Briars. Mrs. Madden calls him the butler."

"Oh! A rather bright chap, eh, Chief?"

"I don't know about that. I haven't had much experience with butlers or murders; but he's the fellow who found the body this morning, and he was bright enough to get in touch with me before telling the family."

"That was good work. But did it strike you as a bit queer, Chief, that he should have sufficient presence of mind to do that? Anything else bright about him?"

"Can't say that there was," the Chief reflected. "But he did seem to know his way about. Fact of the matter is, he didn't notify anybody in the house until after I arrived."

"Better still," Mulvaney declared. "How did he manage that?"

"Can't say. All I know is that he called me, and talked in a sort of whispery voice. He said he thought it

was better for me to get there before anybody in the house knew about it, in case there might be any clues or anything of that sort, you know. Anyways, he met me at the front door and let me in. And now I come to think of it, he did seem to know his way about."

"About the house? Of course he would."

"Well, not exactly that, Captain. What I mean to say is that he acted sort of experienced, if you know what I mean, though I didn't think anything about it at the time. What I mean is that after he met me at the front door he led the way straight to the billiard-room. It's on the ground floor—and yes, I remember now—he stopped outside the door and sort of cautioned me about being careful what I did in the room until the police arrived . . . I mean . . ."

"Of course, he merely meant until you got help, Chief." Mulvaney hastened to fill the gap.

"Yes, that's what he meant." Thompson hesitated, with a scowl which suggested he was really getting his first glimpse at Phipps, the butler. "Anyway, he said there were certain to be clues and that we'd better be careful, meaning me and him."

"So you were careful?"

"Yes, we just walked across the room far enough to make sure there was a body and that the man was dead. I know that for a fact, if that's what you mean, Captain."

"It is, Chief."

"Well, he was dead all right. I saw that, and I saw the bullet-hole in his forehead; but I didn't touch a thing. Then we went back to the door and Phipps locked it and asked if I could put a man on the window. You know what the window's like, Captain? But I guess you don't. Anyway, it's one of those affairs that reach to the floor; and it was standing partly open—faces out on a verandah. I told him I hadn't anybody to put on guard, and he said somebody'd have to be there until the police . . . I mean . . . until you came. So I went on guard myself, and Phipps gave me the key to the billiard-room. Here it is."

Mulvaney accepted the offering.

"Rather good work," he observed absently.

"Thank you, Captain," said the Chief. "But it's tiresome standing around on a verandah for three or four hours, keeping guard over a window. There was a lot of coming and going; but Phipps and the rest made themselves useful, so they got the council together and Edger was appointed special constable as long as he's needed. I wasn't sorry, Captain. That's how I had to take a nap after dinner, and just happened to be asleep when Miss Jenkins called. But she did the right thing to call Dr. Thorley."

"Good work, really good work," Mulvaney insisted. "So it gets down to this: there really has been a murder and so far as you know, no person has been in the room since the happening except yourself and Phipps."

"And Dr. Thorley. He's the coroner—but I told you that before. He went in for a few minutes, not more than two or three—just long enough to make sure the man was dead. But he didn't touch a thing. I saw that for myself, for I stood in the window and . . ."

Chief Thompson hesitated.

"And what, Chief?"

"Come to think of it, Phipps was a bit interested. I didn't think anything about it at the time, but Phipps stood beside me while Dr. Thorley was in the room."

"Well, now," Mulvaney reflected, "I must admit, Chief, that I haven't had much experience with butlers either, but it does look like real efficiency. Anyway, we have a dead man on our hands, and though nobody knows anything about him, that is a starting-point."

"Oh," the Chief corrected, "we all know him. He's Roger Hamstead. Been staying in the village for weeks—must be three weeks at the least; but I expect Mrs. Baxter could tell you the exact day he got here. He's been staying with her, you know. She runs the Orient Hotel, and a decent enough place it is. Caters for tourists; anyway, it's the only hotel in town. Everybody knew Hamstead. He was a friendly sort. Why, he's been in this office a half-dozen times; played draughts with me more than

once, and we had a few good chats. But you could have bowled me over when I found out it was Hamstead who had been murdered."

"Pardon me, Chief; we got the wrong impression from reading the papers. We understood nobody knew anything about Hamstead, who he is, where he came from, what he was doing here, and things like that."

Chief Thompson's heavy features changed.

"Well, I guess maybe I made a mistake, if that's what you're hitting at. Come to think of it, there has been quite a bit of talk about who he was, but nobody seemed to get their fingers on that. Anyway, he was a decent chap. Too bad. But you don't think he was up to any shenanigans, do you, Captain?"

Captain Mulvaney laughed.

"I am inclined to think, Chief," he returned, "that if he was, Burleigh would have known about it long before this."

CHAPTER II

CHIEF THOMPSON accepted the suggestion that he should escort them to the scene of violence. He paused beside Mulvaney's car and stared down the street. There was quite a gathering in front of the post-office, and Miss Fargo's grey head showed prominently.

"Clack, clack!" said the Chief. "But I don't know that she ever had a chance like this before."

A figure separated itself from the gathering and moved quickly towards them.

"I guess we'd better wait," the Chief decided; "that's Deacon Jones."

The Deacon, it appeared, was one of the high-lights of Burleigh. He was on the church board and was a member of the council. In fact, it was due largely to the Deacon's actions that the Chief had been provided with an assistant on such short notice; and though the man Edger was a relative of the Deacon's wife, it was a positive relief to Thompson.

Jones was a gloomy-looking individual, well up in years and with a general air which suggested that he held himself constantly ready for the call to eternity.

"I'm not saying, Chief," he observed darkly, after some brief preliminaries, "but there's things about this business I don't like. It isn't for me to point the first finger; but duty is duty, Chief, and I'd like to know what that Baxter boy was doing near that bit of woods."

Chief Thompson failed to say anything. Possibly that was because he knew his Burleigh.

"Murder's a bad business, Chief." Deacon Jones' voice suggested dark and secret things. "We know where that Baxter boy lives, and we've been around here long enough

to know where the schoolhouse is ; and how that boy got in that bit of woods if he were going straight to school is something we've got to look into."

"I hadn't thought of that, Deacon," Thompson confessed, as though at fault.

"But I had," Jones returned heavily ; "and if these gentlemen know their business"—he glanced at Mulvaney and Kairns as though doubting the point—"I don't mind helping," he added.

"We would be greatly obliged," Mulvaney suggested.

"Thanks," said Jones, and he retreated as rapidly as he had come.

They were half-way to The Briars before Chief Thompson came out of a spell of depression.

"He don't like Widow Baxter," the Chief informed them. "She got a licence to sell beer at the Orient Hotel over his head. . . . But he's right."

"About the beer?" Mulvaney asked.

"No. About how did Ted Baxter get anywhere near The Briars if he was going to school. I don't like the looks of it."

"Miss Fargo should be able to help," the Captain suggested ; but the Chief did not detect anything out of the way in the prompting.

The Briars, it developed, was at the outskirts of Burleigh. It was quite a pretentious affair. Thompson volunteered the information as he piloted the course that, prior to the arrival of Mrs. Ashley Madden about two years ago, it had been closed for some years.

"It's too big a place for any of the natives," he explained. "There must be ten acres of grounds. It used to be owned by some English folks who had lots of money ; then they died off, and it fell into the hands of a nephew who lives in New York, and who's never used it . . . except to pay the taxes. But that's nothing to do with it. There it is."

The Briars was decidedly attractive, standing on a slight hill, and well landscaped with dwarf cedar and pine. The

white building was the old colonial style, with rambling wings and tall french windows looking out upon wide verandahs. The setting conveyed an almost ideal suggestion of rural luxury, with the sprawling lawns, which must have covered two or three acres at the least, and with a sweeping gravel drive leading up to the white pillars of the main entrance.

"And that's the bit of wood at the right where Ted Baxter found the gun," Thompson volunteered, with a wave of his hand in the direction of the only woods in sight. "And there's the school at our left, up that side street to the cow pastures; and you know where Ted Baxter lives, at the Orient Hotel, next block to the post-office. So, you see, Deacon Jones is right. What was the boy doing there?"

"I think we can safely leave that in the hands of Deacon Jones and Miss Fargo," Mulvaney remarked. "Or does there happen to be any conflict between them?"

Chief Thompson pondered that for a time.

"No," he decided. "What I mean is that I don't know that either one has got it in for the other for anything. They both go to the same church and Miss Fargo backed him in fighting Mrs. Baxter's beer licence, so I guess that's all right. . . . Except—you know how it is—they each like to have the first word."

"And the last," Mulvaney added, as the car turned off the village street to the gravel drive leading up to the tall white pillars of The Briars.

"I guess it's all right," the Chief said. "Yes, they do use this drive for cars." Then, almost by way of apology: "Mrs. Madden's a good citizen. I mean, she's meant a lot to Burleigh."

"We'll be careful." The Captain accepted the hint.

When part-way up the drive, they caught a glimpse of a tennis-court in the distance. A game was under way, and people were standing about watching its progress.

"What a crowd!" Mulvaney exclaimed. "You didn't tell us they had a big layout."

"Visitors," the Chief explained. "They've been here for days, maybe a week ; I don't know. But it's been good for Burleigh. Mrs. Madden took on a couple of village girls to help, and they're getting good wages."

"Visitors, eh ?" Mulvaney remarked. "Her own sort, I suppose ?"

"I can't rightly say. I saw them all, poking round this forenoon, but I don't know what they're like, except I sort of remember hearing Deacon Jones saying they must be a fast lot. I have heard there's a bit of liquor around The Briars these days."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mulvaney conceded.

They approached the house by way of the wide-flung verandah which gave access to the billiard-room through the tall french windows. The setting, at close range, was even more pleasing than from a distance. The lawns were perfectly kept ; the decorative trees were neatly trimmed, while some stately maple and elm were dotted about the park-like area. The Briars had been repainted at some time in the not-distant past, and its glittering white-and-green blended admirably with its surroundings. The place wore an air of peace. It was almost as though it dreamed its years away ; while the occasional flitting of birds and the untrammelled patches of sunlight on the wide lawns suggested almost any phase of human activity other than murder.

At the moment, the only person in sight was Edger, posted on the verandah. Edger was strictly of village calibre. He wore one of the Chief's discarded police caps, but beyond that he was in civilian clothes. Apparently he believed in comfort, for he occupied a straight-backed chair tilted against the verandah wall, his legs were crossed, and he was smoking a pipe at leisure. Evidently the pipe had been filled more than once without Edger changing his position, for half-smoked ash on the verandah floor beside him suggested that he believed in the sovereign rights of the police force of Burleigh.

"It ain't a bad job, Sam," he said, and for a moment it

appeared he was on the point of rising. But he changed his mind.

"Where'd you get that?" Thompson showed a flash of officialdom as he pointed at Edger's chest.

That was a police star. It had apparently been cut from cardboard.

"Oh," said Edger, "one of the chaps pinned it on me. It didn't do me any harm, and it seemed to do him good; so I left it there. But if you say so, Sam, I'll take it off."

The Chief seemed uncertain what to do. His moment of arrogance had worn thin.

"Better leave it," Mulvaney suggested. "Some person around this place isn't taking murder very seriously, and it might interest us to find out who he is. What do you think, Amor?"

"Bravado," said Amor Kairns, "is often betraying. The point is worth looking into, Captain."

"I'll do that." The Chief regained his spirit of authority. "We'll do that right now. Here you, Edger, come with me and we'll see who pinned that thing on you."

"It can wait," Kairns suggested.

The Chief slipped again into the background of events; and Mulvaney led the way through the french windows into the billiard-room, where death had left its grim harvest behind it.

The billiard-room seemed spacious, almost huge; though that was merely consistent with the general impression which one gained of The Briars after a journey up the drive and across the lawns. But now, contrary to the brilliance of the summer day outside, it appeared dark and gloomy. The blinds were still drawn, and it was a moment or two before the general setting became clear. There were three tables, one for billiards, two for pool, occupying the front of the room near the french windows; while at the far end, and strung across the full width of the room, were small refreshment tables, supported by wicker chairs.

A body half sat, half crouched in one of the wicker

chairs, while the upper portion was slouched over one of the small tables. Roger Hamstead had been left just as death found him.

Mulvaney and Amor Kairns stood for a time staring down upon the scene; and while they looked, a figure passed through the french windows. He was a tall, well-set-up man, almost youthful in figure, though it was obvious from his face that his years were beyond the run of youth. He wore a butler's uniform, with bright-red braid at the cuffs of the coat and around the buttonholes; and that, somehow, seemed startling. It was not the braid which appeared startling. Rather, it was that a man with the face and figure of this particular type should be in butler's uniform. The athletic form suggested the Rugby field; the keen, pointed features indicated a spirit of independence rather than servitude of this definite sort; yet when the man paused before them, it was with the poise of perfect training.

Amor Kairns stepped into the background and observed. For a time, Captain Mulvaney did not appear to notice the arrival; then eventually Phipps coughed gently. It was a calm and graceful cough, the product of well-disciplined effort; and when he spoke, he looked directly between Mulvaney and Chief Thompson. It was impossible to look at Amor Kairns as well, though there was some suggestion from the slight gesture of Phipps' head that he realized he should be looking at all three.

"Mrs. Madden's compliments, sir," he said, "and if she can be of the slightest service, I am to convey the message."

Mulvaney observed him for a moment; but if Phipps found anything either usual or unusual in the situation, he failed to betray it on his countenance.

"Thank you, Phipps," Mulvaney returned. "You might inform Mrs. Madden that we are greatly obliged, and that we will give ourselves the pleasure of calling upon her later."

Phipps bowed.

"And, Captain," Kairns suggested, "when Phipps has delivered the message, he might return."

Phipps really looked at Amor Kairns for the first time.

"Thank you, sir," he said, then he bowed again and retreated as efficiently as he had arrived.

Apparently he paused on the verandah, for his voice came distantly.

"Would you care for some refreshments, sir?"

The "sir", when applied to Edger, seemed incongruous; but evidently Edger accepted.

"Gosh!" said Chief Thompson, as he stared in the general direction taken by Phipps. "Just like he was this morning—polite, but knows his way about."

"Do you mean you have formed a prejudice against him?" Mulvaney asked, but Thompson shook his head in doubt.

They returned to a study of the murder setting.

There were three small tables strung across the end of the room. Evidently they were intended merely for casual refreshments and not for regular meals, as they were rectangular, probably two and a half feet in width by about three feet in length, and they were placed close against the wall with their ends making the contact. Each table was accompanied by two chairs, as though this were a quiet little spot where pool or billiard players might pause for a moment, or where the watchers might while away the time. The tops of the tables were some sort of green glass composition, blending with the general furnishings of the billiard-room, and they were without covering or cloth of any sort.

Only one table showed any signs of recent occupancy. It was at the centre, where the man Hamstead still crouched in death. There were two drinking-glasses on the table, both partly filled with some kind of amber liquid, while an ash-tray, pushed close to the wall, contained the stubs of three cigarettes.

"An interesting scene, eh, Mulvaney?" Kairns was the first to speak, after their preliminary examination. "What do you make of it, Captain? Or, Chief, would you care to pass an opinion?"

Thus complimented, Chief Thompson appeared astonished; then instantly he dashed into the situation.

"I'd say, Mr. Kairns, that they quarrelled in their drink, and one bloke up and shot the other."

Kairns leaned over and sniffed at the glasses.

"Ginger ale, I'd say," he pronounced, as he paused by the glass which Hamstead had apparently been using, "and . . . rum," he decided, after lingering a trifle longer beside the opposite glass.

Then Kairns leaned over and peered at the sides of the glass.

"Work for you already, Captain," he observed. "There are finger-prints on this glass, as it was very obvious there must be—unless this scene contradicted itself, and unless some person took the trouble to remove the prints."

Kairns glanced about the room until he found a small buffet in a corner. A door hung partly open, and there was glassware beyond, though from the distance its nature was not evident.

"The decanter must be there," Kairns suggested, "and possibly there are other finger-prints on the door. Work for you, Mulvaney, but that is at least a starting-place. And, pardon me, I interrupted the Chief's remarks."

"I never had much to do with finger-prints," Thompson informed. "And I guess that's what Phipps meant this morning when he told me to be careful until the police . . . I mean, until you arrived."

Kairns nodded.

"Did they quarrel, Captain?" he asked. "That is, did they quarrel in the ordinary sense of the word? We know, of course, that two men sat at this table last night and that one shot the other; but was there a scene before the shooting?"

"No," Mulvaney decided instantly. "The position of the table is not shifted in the least. I would say that Hamstead was sitting there, with elbows on the table. . . . You can see where one hand is still flung out towards his glass. He was probably holding his glass like that when the

shot came. Dash it all, Amor, this has been a devilish cold-blooded affair. See the position of the murderer's chair. He was sitting with his left side to the table, back to the wall, probably holding his glass with the left hand while the right was under the table. . . . Then out came the right hand suddenly, and he fired the shot in a damned treacherous manner."

"Rather well summarized, I would say," Kairns complimented, and Chief Thompson stared.

"Hang it all!" he said. "I didn't see that!"

"It is extremely useful to study details of that sort, Chief," Kairns informed him quietly. "Details often tell you much about the temperament of the man you are seeking. You can see, Chief, that we already know that the person who murdered Hamstead is not a highly-strung, nervous or flighty individual. On the contrary, he is cool, calm, and collected, devilish cold-blooded, with a heart like stone. Murderers, of course, fall into many classifications. Some murder through the heat of the moment; but we know that our murderer must have murdered, not in the heat of the moment, but with fiendish calculation. So you notice, Chief, that we have a general idea of the sort of man who fired the shot. And one shot was enough. It struck Hamstead fairly in the centre of the forehead. Anything else, Captain?"

Mulvaney was on his knees prowling about the table.

"Something here," he said. "Looks like a few strands of cloth caught in the chair."

Kairns stooped over to examine Mulvaney's discovery. Clearly enough, the chair—of modernistic metal construction, and painted green to match the table-top and the balance of the room—had trapped a fragment of cloth between the seat and the back.

"May as well bring it out, Captain," Kairns suggested.

Mulvaney extracted it gently, though it required effort.

"Firmly wedged," he said, as he used pressure to spread the metal work which had caught the strands. "Well, I'll be hanged!"

Mulvaney held up the cloth. Kairns whistled softly.

"Feminine fabric," the latter remarked. "Pale blue. Voile, I would call it. Looks like a fragment from a scarf, the trimming of a skirt, or something of that sort. But feminine, quite distinctly."

"Gosh!" said Chief Thompson, as he stroked his chin aimlessly. "A woman, and we thought it was a man! Now won't that set their tongues a-wagging?"

Amor Kairns paused, with a sudden flash in his eyes.

"You were thinking perhaps of Miss Mamie Fargo?" he asked, and the Chief seemed surprised at the accuracy of the question.

"We wish, of course, to work with you, Chief," Kairns went on. "We were sent here for that purpose; but you realize, naturally, the necessity for secrecy—secrecy in all things."

The Chief was embarrassed.

"I don't know anybody better than Mamie Fargo to find out who has a dress like that," he said, by way of defence. "I expect she could tell you now off-hand."

"But could not keep the information to herself?"

"I guess not."

They returned to their examination of the murder scene. The three cigarette-stubs suggested a possibility, particularly as the trays on the other tables were free of refuse of any sort.

"Not even a trace of ash in these other ash-trays," Kairns observed. "So the inference, Captain, must be that all the trays were cleaned some time last night and that Hamstead and the murderer sat down to a clean setting. Let me see."

Kairns studied the stubs at length. Mulvaney looked over his shoulder.

"A bit classy, eh, Amor?" the Captain asked. "For if I don't miss my guess, two of those butts bear an initial. Two butts with an initial, one without. Now what is that initial? An *H* or *R*? Neither, I would say."

"Looks more like an *S* to me," Kairns decided. "It is a trifle frayed, but possibly if we removed the tobacco from

one and flattened out the paper we might be in a better position to judge."

Mulvaney removed the tobacco. The paper, when pressed flat against the top of the adjoining table, left the initial much more clear-cut. It was a distinct S.

"That should help." Mulvaney was rapidly becoming keener on the scent. "So these cigarette-butts tell us something. Hamstead apparently smoked one of his own variety, while the murderer smoked two of his favourite brand—and that brand was specially made for his benefit, and was marked with the letter S. I suppose, Amor, we may take it that the initial represents his own name?"

"People who are silly enough to have their cigarettes made specially for them, and who go in for such luxury as initials, generally use their own names," Kairns replied. "But in this case there is no guarantee. But if it happens to be true this time, it is rather stupid, don't you think?"

"It wasn't brilliant," Mulvaney agreed. "But it tells us something else—that he is a rapid smoker. . . . He smoked two cigarettes to Hamstead's one."

"Or remained in the room for some time after the murder," Kairns corrected. "Anything else this table can tell us?"

They considered the situation for some time, but so far as could be observed, there were no further surface clues.

"Might be some finger-prints on the top of the table," Mulvaney suggested. "But I can look into that later when I am taking copies of the prints from the rum-glass. We don't see quite eye to eye in this, Amor. What I mean is that the murderer doesn't fit the description you gave of him a few minutes ago."

"How so?" Kairns asked.

"You said he was cold-blooded, that he did the trick with fiendish calculation—yet he left finger-prints behind him. The two don't fit. The real criminal knows the danger of finger-prints these days."

Kairns glanced at him curiously.

"Did I suggest that he was a real criminal?" he asked.

"A cold-blooded murderer doesn't necessarily have to be an experienced criminal. . . . Now, let me see. . . ."

Amor Kairns seemed interested in the metal chair which had trapped a fragment of the pale-blue voile.

"I wonder . . ." he said, then he sat down in the chair.

"Yes," he declared, a moment later. "That is quite natural. It could happen, for when the weight of the body comes against the chair, the back springs slightly. The fold of a dress could easily catch in the space between the seat and the back of the chair; then when the weight of the body was removed it would be held securely. -But, Captain, just how does that happen to present us with a conflict?"

Captain Mulvaney nodded sharply.

"I thought of that one myself," he declared. "I guess you lose, Amor; it wasn't a cold-blooded murderer after all. For even a murderess couldn't tear herself free from a chair without knowing something about it at the time, and if she was really cool about it she must have known the danger of leaving that bit of cloth behind."

Kairns was prowling about the huge room. He had come to the buffet, where the door stood partly open and where glasses and bottles showed through the opening.

"You must examine this door for prints, Captain," he suggested, as he touched the top of the door gently with a finger-tip and forced it wider. "Ah! What's this?"

This happened to be a bottle of rum, freshly pened. There were a number of bottles in the buffet, suggesting a variety of liquors. Some were unopened, some were partly empty, while in the front row and extending slightly beyond the others was the bottle of rum which, if not freshly opened, had not been patronized for more than a drink or two.

"One large drink, or two small ones," Kairns guessed, as he dropped to his knees and examined the bottle without touching it. "I think we may assume, Captain, that the bottle was opened last night. Assuredly we may."

Kairns reached into the buffet and produced a white cloth.

"Handkerchief," he decided. "Just the sort of thing a person would use to protect his hand when he put it about the neck of the bottle as he went through the business of drawing the cork. Of course that is it; for there is the corkscrew quite out of place, tossed carelessly back, and not on its tray. Phipps, I can imagine, would not tolerate that sort of procedure from any of the servants. A handkerchief, tossed back with the corkscrew and forgotten. Devilish careless, if you ask me, Captain. What do you make of it?"

Captain Mulvaney took the handkerchief and examined it at leisure. Then he shook his head.

"Things are coming too easy," he said. "This is a woman's handkerchief—and, if you ask me, it too has an initial. Too easy, Amor—much too easy."

"Possibly, but what is the initial?"

"I should have said initials. They are *L.M.*"

Kairns dropped back upon his haunches on the floor and stared at the markings which Mulvaney exposed to his gaze. Then he too shook his head.

"As you say, Captain, much too easy. And, by the way, isn't that a trace of blood on the hem?"

"It is the colour of blood," the Captain admitted cautiously, as he reached for the bottle of rum.

"Don't!" Kairns exclaimed.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Thanks for saving me from being stupid. You are thinking of finger-prints on the bottle. Well, I would say the bottle-neck wasn't broken when he or she drew the cork."

"Agreed. No sign of a break."

Both glanced back at the table where the small trickle of blood from the bullet-hole in the dead man's forehead was congealed on the green glass top of the table. Kairns shrugged his shoulders.

"Not quite fitting, is it, Captain?" he asked. "But to come back to the initials. What do you make of them, Chief?"

Thompson, consulted thus abruptly, seemed astonished.

"I've been thinking about that," he said. "The *M* could stand for Madden, but I don't get the *L*. I thought the husband's name was Horace."

"So it is," Kairns agreed. "And we can't, by any possible stretch of the imagination, turn that *L* into an *H*. But I don't mind telling you something, Chief, if you don't pass it along where it will fall on Mamie Fargo's tongue."

Thompson seemed uncomfortable for a moment.

"I guess I've had my lesson," he said. "We get sort of free and easy ways in a place the size of this, and I just didn't think when I spoke a minute ago."

"All right, Chief, we'll forget that. So I don't mind informing you that Mrs. Ashley Madden's maiden name was Louise Angus."

"Gosh!" The Chief fell back on his favourite exclamation. "*L.M.* Louise Madden. Gosh! That would set their tongues to wagging, Mr. Kairns, if I dare tell them."

There was obvious regret in the Chief's tones. Village instinct seemed to be tugging strongly, and it was perhaps unfortunate that he could not enjoy the centre of the stage by speaking the lines which would set the tongues a-wagging.

Possibly the Chief might have had something more to say about it, but just then Phipps returned.

CHAPTER III

PHIPPS' pose was correct. It emphasized his athletic figure; and when his quick glance took in their position in front of the buffet, with the handkerchief and the freshly opened bottle of rum in plain sight, it appeared that a faint trace of satisfaction showed on his lean countenance. Or possibly it was merely a well-schooled attempt at sympathetic understanding.

"You asked me to return, sir." This time he looked directly at Amor Kairns. For a moment he appeared to be appraising Kairns, and again that indefinite suggestion of satisfaction showed in his manner.

"Yes, Phipps," Kairns returned briskly. "We have gone over the billiard-room hurriedly and made some observations; but since you were the party to find the body, you may help us to place certain details."

"I will be delighted to oblige," Phipps assured him, though without overdoing the tone.

"Then do you mind telling us how you happened to find the body?"

"I was around early this morning, possibly by seven o'clock," Phipps informed readily, as though he knew the details by heart. "Mrs. Madden had planned a little outing for her guests, and I was around early to make certain preparations were under way for their lunch to be put up properly. They were planning to leave the beaten track. Since it was such a pleasant morning, I made my rounds, opening up the house, throwing open the doors and things of that sort, and when I came to the billiard-room, I made the discovery."

"Shortly after seven. No other person was around by that time?"

"Not of the household. There was activity in the

kitchens and the servants' quarters. But it is my duty to open the house in the mornings, so naturally I found the body. Mr. Hamstead had been dead for some time, sir. The moment I opened the billiard-room I detected the unusual, sir. The french windows were open. I mean, the one section was open, just as you see it now. Nothing has been disturbed, so far as I am aware."

Phipps paused for an instant only, and his quick glance left Kairns' face for a moment and journeyed to the handkerchief which rested upon the buffet shelf.

"You seem to have done very well in that respect," Kairns complimented.

"Thank you, sir. I flatter myself I have an instinct for such matters, though doubtless it is only flattery. But, as I was about to observe, the moment I detected the french window was open I recognized the unusual. For I knew it should not be open, since I had closed and secured it myself on the previous evening. I then looked hurriedly about the room and discovered the body. In my surprise I approached and touched it—the hand, I mean. It was quite cold, so I knew at once that the murder had been committed some hours previous."

"Very good, Phipps," Kairns complimented again. "The Chief here informs me that you used your head to a most gratifying degree. You got in touch with him before wakening the household."

"The Chief is very kind, sir." Phipps bowed slightly, and the honour seemed to be intended jointly for Thompson and Kairns. "But, as I have said, I flatter myself I have an instinct for such matters. I do not pretend to understand it, sir, but it occurred to me instantly that since it was so clearly a case of murder, the police would appreciate anything I could do to preserve the scene intact. That would have been impossible if I had wakened the household."

Kairns pondered him at length, and his frank gaze was complimentary.

"You doubtless made your own observations?" he suggested.

"Indeed, sir, I did," Phipps assured readily. "It naturally was a shock to find a stranger murdered in Mrs. Madden's billiard-room——"

"Yet you referred to him a moment ago as Mr. Hamstead," Kairns interrupted.

"Yes, sir, I did." Phipps did not appear to find anything unusual in the situation. "Chief Thompson informed me that his name was Roger Hamstead. The village girls, who have been taken on while Mrs. Madden has guests, have also spoken of him by that name. His name seems to have been well known in the village, though he was a stranger to The Briars."

Phipps paused, as though wondering if he had covered the situation. Kairns nodded for him to proceed.

"As I observed," he said, "it was something of a shock for me to find a man murdered in the house, but at the same time my instinct prompted me to make my observations. The first question which rushed to my mind was to wonder who did it—since it was so apparent that it must have been done by some person in the house, or at least with the connivance of some inmate of The Briars."

"Rather well reasoned, Phipps." Kairns agreed with the point. "You are suggesting, of course, that the french window must have been opened by some person in the house to admit Hamstead?"

"That flashed to my mind almost instantly. Though possibly it was only natural in view of my particular duties. Perhaps you realize, Mr. —— I beg your pardon, sir."

"Kairns. . . . And this is Captain Mulvaney of the Ridgeport force."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate the compliment. But, as I was saying, it would have been a reflection on my manner of performing my duties if any of the doors or french windows had been left unlocked last evening. Since I made my rounds at about 12.30, after the last guest had gone upstairs, I can state confidently that all doors and french windows were closed and locked at that hour. Under those circumstances, I recognized that some person

in the house must have risen through the night and opened this window to admit Mr. Hamstead to his death. That is primary, sir, I believe?"

Kairns smiled slightly.

"You are invaluable, Phipps," he suggested.

"Thank you, sir." Phipps seemed to appreciate the situation. "That is the reason I made my observations after I telephoned for Chief Thompson."

Amor Kairns' glance wandered about the room.

"Then possibly you have detected something irregular which we have overlooked," he suggested.

"I trust so, sir. But I see you have discovered the handkerchief bearing the initials *L.M.* It was not in the buffet when I closed the room last night."

Kairns waited for him to proceed.

"Have you discovered the fact that a fresh bottle of rum was opened, despite the fact that there was another bottle in the row half filled?"

"Phipps," said Kairns, "you are remarkable. We had not discovered that."

Queerly enough, there was no particular gratification on the butler's face. It was more as though he were going through some routine of duty.

"But you have undoubtedly found the cigarette-stubs with the initial *S*," Phipps added. "That would be simple for a gentleman of your experience."

"Yes, Phipps, we did find that; and that is one point we wanted to ask you. Was this room cleaned last night after the guests left it, or did some person drop those butts in the ash-tray through the evening?"

"I have inquired into the matter, Mr. Kairns, since the affair touched upon my duties. My memory was that the trays had been cleaned; and Lucy Jupp, the housemaid, informs me that she did the work personally. There is no reason why she should give me false information, Mr. Kairns."

"And does the initial *S* suggest anything to you?" Kairns asked.

"Indeed it does, sir, though in a purely primary way. There is nothing conclusive about it."

"Then there is somebody in the house with that initial, who smokes such cigarettes?"

"I feel, sir, that the ownership of such cigarettes will not be difficult to trace. You will appreciate that I am not making charges. I am merely making a direct statement of fact. There is a Mr. Sangster in the house, sir. He was here last night. Mr. Sangster is a guest—has been for the past week or more. He is fastidious, if I may be so bold as to express it in that manner. Mr. Sangster smokes cigarettes with his initial stamped on the paper."

"You are observing." Kairns' voice could have been a compliment, or otherwise.

"It would be difficult not to detect that simple fact, Mr. Kairns."

Kairns considered Phipps for a time, but the latter did not appear in the least aware of the unusual. Outwardly he was simply giving information, though that did not alter the fact that his face and figure did not entirely live up to the traditions of butlership.

"You amaze me, Phipps, if I may say so," Kairns observed. "And now possibly you don't mind calling our attention to some details which have escaped our observation."

Still Phipps accepted that as a normal part of his existence.

"Speaking purely as an inmate of The Briars who has had an opportunity to think for a few hours," Phipps suggested, "may I inquire if you have discovered the silencer of a revolver?"

"Hanged if we have!" Mulvaney inserted, and Phipps' glance swung slowly in his direction.

"Then I would advise, Mr. Mulvaney," Phipps returned, "that you look in the central pocket on the south side of the first pool-table."

Mulvaney hurried towards the spot. He peered into the pocket, and appeared on the point of reaching his

hand into the net receptacle, when Phipps coughed rather sharply. Mulvaney looked at him queerly.

"I was merely about to suggest," Phipps said, "that though I located the silencer quite early this morning, before Chief Thompson arrived——"

"Then why the devil didn't you show it to me?" the Chief demanded, as though he had long wished to speak but had not found an opening.

"An oversight, I am certain," Phipps returned slowly. "There were so many things to be considered. But as I was about to say, Captain, though I located the silencer quite early, I did not touch it. I felt, naturally, that it should be left for the police to learn if it contained any clues."

Captain Mulvaney appeared crestfallen, while Amor Kairns laughed easily.

"Rather good, Phipps," Kairns remarked; "and you will doubtless agree, Captain. Since the silencer has not been touched since it was dropped into that pocket—ostensibly by the murderer—we may assume that it possibly bears finger-prints. Is that not so, Phipps?"

"It is not for me to say, sir, but doubtless there is such a possibility."

It was a moment or two before Kairns stopped smiling, though his glance was upon Mulvaney rather than upon Phipps.

"Anything else?" he prompted at length.

This time Phipps appeared to be considering the matter.

"There is, sir," he decided, "though it is purely theory and may not be supported by fact. I speak solely from my knowledge of the structure of The Briars. Have you examined that portion of the french window which is still closed?"

"No, Phipps, we haven't," Kairns confessed. "But should we?"

"From your knowledge of The Briars, perhaps not. But from the information which has fallen my way, I would suggest that the time might not be entirely wasted.

I was thinking, sir, of the fact that it is next to impossible to open the french window without having both sections pull open at the same time. That appears due to some peculiarity of structure, though I do not pretend to understand such things. I merely know that though I have opened the window scores of times I have never yet succeeded in opening the section which now stands ajar without, at the same time, pulling the other section wide open. The window is precisely as I found it. The inference is that the person who opened the window some time through the night to admit Mr. Hamstead did the most natural thing. He possibly placed a hand on the frame of the one section and closed it."

"Admirable!" Kairns seemed to be staring far beyond the french window. "Delightful! Suppose, Mulvaney, you take a glance at it?"

The Captain obliged. He occupied two or three minutes in his examination while Phipps remained standing, facing Kairns.

"Can't say for certain, but I think there are fingerprints," Mulvaney reported eventually. "And that reminds me, there is too much work for me to do here alone unless we are to waste all kinds of time. I am going to 'phone through for Fricker, the finger-print expert, to hurry along. Where is there a telephone, Phipps?"

"This way, sir?"

They returned a few minutes later, and Phipps still stood at attention, like a good soldier.

"That, I believe, sir, is all the suggestions I have to make." He addressed Kairns.

"Except that you may have formed some theory as to who . . . rose through the night and admitted Hamstead to his death."

Phipps' glance journeyed slowly from the handkerchief on the buffet shelf to the cigarette-stubs, then back to Kairns' face.

"That is extremely difficult," he said. "There are too many possibles."

"I see," Cairns encouraged. "Each person who stayed in the house last night could be a possible. And there are many?"

"Quite, sir. There are fourteen . . . possibles—including myself, sir. If there is nothing more you wish, Mr. Cairns . . ."

Cairns waved a hand politely; then Phipps bowed, and as he moved slowly across the room and through the french window the unconscious grace of the athlete showed in his every movement.

CHAPTER IV

"I TOLD you the butler bloke knew his way about." Chief Thompson was glaring in the direction so recently taken by Phipps, and though his face was slightly flushed with irritation, it was not entirely devoid of respect.

Mulvaney was trying to avoid a scowl.

"Dashed efficient!" he said. "Too dashed efficient! How do butlers get that way?"

Kairns laughed.

"Come, Mulvaney," he remarked, "we scored a distinct victory over Phipps on one point. He overlooked the bit of pale-blue voile."

"Well, if you should ask me," the Captain returned grudgingly, "he had a busy morning—an extremely busy morning."

"And I was thinking," Kairns added, "that in view of the efficiency we have already witnessed, the one person at The Briars most apt to know the ownership of that something-or-other made of pale-blue voile would be Phipps; I mean, apart from the owner."

"Going to ask him?" Mulvaney challenged, and Kairns merely shrugged his shoulders in reply.

There were routine duties to be performed. Mulvaney took charge of the cigarette-stubs and other removable clues; then Dr. Thorley was called to superintend the removal of the body. While waiting for the coroner to arrive, Kairns and Mulvaney examined the buffet at greater length.

Phipps was right. In addition to the rum-bottle which had evidently been freshly opened through the night for the removal of a small quantity of liquor, there was already a bottle of the same brand in plain sight and still half filled.

"Now why did he do that?" Mulvaney demanded.

"There must have been some reason, for even murderers generally follow some sort of logic. But it doesn't show on the surface in this case."

They were still pondering the seemingly unnecessary act when Dr. Thorley arrived. The village doctor was well advanced in years, and somehow it appeared that he had collected some of the general atmosphere of Burleigh. He was a brisk little man with a suggestion of rural shagginess, and he nodded at Chief Thompson in a slightly superior manner.

"A bad business, gentlemen; a bad business." He broke into conversation almost immediately, and his words seemed to sweep out and embrace all three listeners. "But, as I said at the dinner-table, it won't be long before gentlemen of your sort get to the bottom of things. I have brought the undertaker along, but if there is anything I can do for you before he sets to work, I will be only too glad. That's what I said to Aunt Sarah Jane at the dinner-table . . . we must all turn in and do the best we can."

"There really isn't much, Doctor," Kairns replied. "There doesn't appear to be the slightest doubt as to the cause of death; but of course it will be necessary for you to verify the point. And naturally we will need the bullet, for I understand a revolver has been found."

"Yes, indeed. Rather quick work that; extremely quick work. We are not accustomed to doing things as rapidly as that in Burleigh."

Somehow the voice suggested doubt as to the wisdom of the speed with which the revolver had been located.

"Of course, it may not be the right weapon at all," Kairns suggested. "We cannot tell until you have recovered the bullet."

"Certainly not." Dr. Thorley agreed heartily. "But I will soon have that for you; and as Aunt Sarah Jane said at the dinner-table, the revolver couldn't have been really hidden, or that Baxter boy would never have found it, unless . . . of course . . ." Dr. Thorley broke off suddenly. "We had a late dinner," he informed. "Nearly

always do. It's a habit we've got into. Now if you have anything else to suggest, Mr. Kairns . . ."

Dr. Thorley called the undertaker and set to work.

Apparently two minds in Burleigh had worked along the same pathway. Deacon Jones and Aunt Sarah Jane had each taken a swift glance at the discovery of the Baxter boy and had formed their own doubtful conclusions. Miss Jenkins, it appeared, still had the revolver at the schoolhouse, but school would soon be over and she had agreed to leave the weapon at Dr. Thorley's office.

"Save you a few steps," he announced briskly. "There couldn't be any finger-prints on it now, after all those people had handled it. Yes, I know the value of finger-prints, and I hear your expert is already on the way."

Kairns controlled his astonishment, and Dr. Thorley paused in his work of directing the removal of the body.

"Nothing peculiar in that, Mr. Kairns," he said. "Mamie Fargo dropped in and told Aunt Sarah Jane, and she told me. Miss Fargo, I understand, got it from Mrs. Parsons, who was on the switchboard when Captain Mulvaney put his call through. . . . Careful there, men. . . . But Fricker would have to be a good man to find any prints on that revolver now, with all those people handling it."

"All those people?" Mulvaney asked, with a trace of irritation.

"Yes," Dr. Thorley agreed readily. "The Baxter boy, Miss Jenkins, the school principal, and I expect the rest of the teachers . . . two others. Found anything yet for Fricker to work on? Oh, I see."

Dr. Thorley, seemingly more brisk, though he was standing quite still, was staring at the top of the table. He nodded sharply.

"Well, it isn't my business," he admitted. "But that should be a good place for prints. It reminds me of something; but, dash it all, I can't place it now! All right, I'll be on my way."

Mulvaney delayed him long enough to caution him not to touch anything in Hamstead's pockets.

"I understand perfectly," Dr. Thorley assured. "There might be papers . . . finger-prints. I hope Fricker is a good man."

Dr. Thorley departed as briskly as he had arrived, and Captain Mulvaney gave a vast sigh of relief. Or it may have been a sound of irritation.

"Does Burleigh always work like that, Chief?" he asked, with some asperity.

"Like what?" Thompson returned. "Oh, I see what you mean. The doctor has a knack of getting things done in a hurry."

Edger still occupied the verandah chair. So far as could be observed, he had not shifted his position, even fractionally. He did not shift it when Mulvaney stopped in front of him; but he gave his assurance that, during his occupancy of the verandah, there had not been the slightest approach on the part of any guest or member of The Briars household other than the "young gentleman" who pinned the police pasteboard star on his chest. Even that individual who, Edger fancied, would be recognized at sight, had not displayed any interest in the billiard-room.

"I doubt if any person will," Cairns declared, "for already there is a pattern of murder showing up in a most peculiar manner. Is that not so, Captain?"

"I guess so," Mulvaney agreed; but in the end it was decided that it might be good strategy if Edger should be sent to prowl round the grounds while Chief Thompson remained inside, thoroughly concealed from casual observation. Mulvaney suggested a cushion and a corner, on the floor, or possibly a convenient position under a pool-table.

Chief Thompson accepted the suggestion readily.

"I get the idea," he assured. "I'm good at things like that. I've been hunting wild duck many a time, and I know how to make a hide. You can leave it to me."

Edger was sent to make it obvious that he was no longer on guard. His main duty was to be seen somewhere in the grounds—anywhere, as long as it was out of line with the approach to the french window leading to the billiard-room.

"Got your revolver, Chief?" Mulvaney asked; and the latter said "Damn!"

Then Mulvaney grinned, and the Chief hurried into an explanation as to how he had set many an ambush for wild duck.

Edger started to trudge across the lawns in the direction of the tennis-players, while Mulvaney and Kairns presented themselves for a call upon Mrs. Ashley Madden.

Phipps evidently had been expecting the call, for the front door opened to their approach and he met them just outside. With the stronger light upon him, he seemed even less born to the part of the butler, though his pose and mannerism did not suggest the slightest flaw. It was, perhaps, that his face was too lean and tanned. It was actually bronzed, contrary to the indoor type of countenance which is generally encountered in persons of that particular calling.

"You are about to have a conversation with Mrs. Madden?" Phipps ventured. "She is expecting you; but may I be so bold as to ask a question?"

"Anything you like, Phipps," Kairns assured.

"I mention it because it may be of some guidance to you in your interview with Mrs. Madden." Phipps' tone was apologetic. "Otherwise I would not have been so bold. What I wished to ask was if you have learned the nature of the markings on the revolver found by the Baxter boy?"

"No, Phipps, we haven't," Kairns returned. "But I can tell at a glance that you can enlighten us."

"I fear I am most transparent." Phipps was still inclined to apologize. "It comes, I presume, from the simple life I have led. But it is true, Mr. Kairns, that I can enlighten you; though possibly I should explain how the information reached me. It appears that Mr. Anderson—that is the principal at the public school—telephoned the detail to Mrs. Anderson, and that Mrs. Anderson called up a Miss Mamie Fargo. You may possibly hear of Miss Fargo if you remain long at Burleigh. The girl who works for

Mrs. Anderson three days a week happened to overhear the call to Miss Fargo. Her hearing, I believe, is fairly acute. The girl gave the information to the butcher boy; the butcher boy told Lizzie Murdock, one of the village girls taken on temporarily at The Briars while guests are staying, and Lizzie Murdock told Lucy Jupp, the housemaid. I had it from Miss Jupp only a few minutes ago."

"So it is reliable?" Kairns observed.

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Kairns. It is not the sort of information which would lose anything in the telling, and owing to its brevity I am certain little has been added to it. The marking on the revolver, Mr. Kairns, took the form of two initial letters. They were *H.M.*"

Kairns paused for an instant only.

"Mr. Madden's given name, I understand, is Horace?" he asked.

"You have been correctly informed, Mr. Kairns; but, as I remarked a moment ago, Mrs. Madden is expecting you."

Phipps turned, and with butler-like exactness he opened the door and held it for them to pass through.

CHAPTER V

MRS. ASHLEY MADDEN received them in an upper sitting-room. It was at the front of The Briars, overlooking the spacious grounds, and Mrs. Madden occupied a flowered alcove of such generous dimensions that there was room for a female companion who sat opposite her, while chairs had been arranged for Captain Mulvaney and Amor Kairns. Some might have called it a window-nook, but it was more nearly like a solarium.

Mrs. Madden held out a hand to each of them without rising. Then she apologized for asking them to climb the stairway, and explained that this was her favourite corner at The Briars.

"There was a time when I didn't object to climbing stairways myself," she added. "But you gentlemen don't look as though you would mind."

It was strange to see Mrs. Madden in that particular role. It was emphasized by her costume. For her hair, not bobbed, was parted in the centre and was drawn firmly back in the most simple manner which the mind of women could devise. That lent accent to her clear-cut, sharp features; while a grey shawl drawn about her shoulders completed the picture of middle age which has put the lures of the world aside and which has settled down to permit the years to glide peacefully around it. Mrs. Madden's costume was plain, almost severe, and her feet were resting on a stool. The general *ensemble* was in such striking contrast to the Mrs. Madden which the world believed it knew that it was almost a shock.

There was further contrast, if such were needed, in the person who sat directly opposite her. For while Mrs. Madden's costume would hardly have created a ripple in a convent, her companion was ultra modern.

"Miss Jessie Burn," said Mrs. Madden; and the flash of modern femininity rose briskly and extended a hand, first to Captain Mulvaney, then to Kairns.

Amor Kairns held the hand a trifle longer than was absolutely essential; but that seemed to be excused by his glance. For Kairns' glance said quite plainly that he was intensely interested.

"Surely not *the* Miss Jessie Burn?" he asked.

"Indeed it is," Miss Burn replied. "I believe there is only one Jessie Burn in the whole wide world."

Miss Burn's voice suggested that she must be a rather pleasant individual, though she had long since passed the age when physical charm had any particular bearing on such situations. For Jessie Burn, though ultra modern, could not conceal the years.

"But, Mr. Kairns," Mrs. Madden suggested, "you must not associate the past with the present."

As she said it she drew the grey shawl more firmly about her throat and she glanced at the window as though to imply that possibly there was too much draught, though the summer sun still left its pattern on the lawns beyond. Mrs. Madden was clearly and distinctly of the middle years which had put behind them all the flair of youth.

The Jessie Burn sat down, while Mulvaney and Kairns made themselves comfortable. Kairns continued to look at her, much as one might stare at the pyramids or at some other of the world's wonders after hearing of them through the years. For *the* Jessie Burn could not be dissociated from the past of Mrs. Ashley Madden, regardless of where she might fit into the present or the future.

Through the various undulations of Mrs. Madden's variegated career, Jessie Burn had been described in different ways. Some, in moments of kindness, had referred to her simply as Mrs. Madden's companion. Others, particularly in newspaper circles in later years, spoke of her as "that Madden woman's press agent". Some added the word "hard-boiled" in front of "press agent". Still others,

inclined to look upon life from the more vulgar angle, branded her simply as "Madden's come-on artist".

Regardless of which phrase fitted Jessie Burn the most accurately, it remained that for years she had figured prominently in most of the publicity efforts which attended Mrs. Madden's exploits. She was, in other words, a paid press agent; and those who were disposed to admire her work did not make any attempt to conceal the fact that, except for the association of Jessie Burn, Mrs. Madden would have attempted fewer ventures. From their definite viewpoint, Jessie Burn was the brains of the pair. Mrs. Madden might have a distinct gift for histrionics, but it was Jessie Burn who planned the stage setting. They said it was Jessie Burn who plotted Mrs. Madden's first evangelistic appeal from an aeroplane; that it was Jessie Burn who actually arranged the police raid on Mrs. Madden's night club in New York and which was responsible for columns of front-page space in the newspapers; and they said Jessie Burn violently opposed her futile attempt to become elected governor of Kansas. But however that may be, Jessie Burn now offered a striking contrast to Mrs. Ashley Madden and thereby provided her with the opportunity to continue her acting, if it really were not the middle years which were leaving their placid marks upon her.

Mrs. Madden actually seemed placid. Except for the eyes, she might have been accepted for what she appeared, a middle-aged woman with severe straight hair and with a grey shawl about her shoulders. But the eyes somehow made things different. For regardless of what else she could change, Mrs. Madden could not alter her eyes. And they were sharp and greedy.

"The past is of the past," Kairns agreed. "Unfortunate, is it not, Mrs. Madden, that the years should sweep beyond us? Yet possibly at times they bring back a little of their old flavour."

Mrs. Madden shook her head slowly.

"No, it is not that," she said. "It is just misfortune which has come upon us."

"Then suppose you tell us all about it," Kairns suggested sympathetically.

"I am quite willing," she returned readily. "In fact, I am anxious to do so. But there is so little to tell."

Mrs. Madden paused reflectively; if it were acting, it was well done, for a slightly wistful expression came to her greedy eyes and there was no indication that she required urging.

"I feel a great responsibility in this situation," she went on at length. "And at the same time I owe a duty to each person at The Briars except the one who killed Mr. Hamstead. No, no, Mr. Kairns! Please do not interrupt me just yet. We concede—Jessie and I—that it must have been some person who was in the house last night. Jessie and I, you see, have discussed it from many angles, yet we have refrained from asking questions. The only person we have questioned is Phipps. And that was on one point only. We asked about the house, you understand?—the doors and windows. You doubtless have already asked the same question. It would be so . . . so primary."

"Yes, Mrs. Madden, it is extremely primary. You, of course, have received the same answer."

"Naturally; for Phipps is undoubtedly consistent. You realize, Mr. Kairns, what a problem it placed upon us the moment we learned that, when Phipps made his rounds last night, all the doors and windows were closed from the inside?"

Kairns nodded his sympathy.

"Difficult, I fear," he said, "for the guests are of your own choosing."

"Yes," she returned. "But had you progressed to the stage of limiting the possibilities to the guests?"

The question was rather well put, and Kairns conceded his error.

"I cannot say I am glad to hear you admit that it need not be limited to the guests." Mrs. Madden's voice was still reflective, and her attitude was almost completely

that of an anxious hostess, with the responsibility which she suggested. "I know I should not have any sentiments in the matter whatever. . . . But that is wrong. I must have my sentiments. I fear I cannot deny them. A person must be human, Mr. Kairns ; and Jessie and I have discussed the matter so frankly from every angle which occurred to us that we are confused. But we have gone over each inmate of the house impartially, guest as well as servant, and there is not one whom we are not anxious to say did not do it. I fear I only confuse you, Mr. Kairns."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Madden, you arouse my admiration," Kairns assured. "You have expressed a most natural sentiment."

Mrs. Madden loosened the grey shawl from about her throat, and she stared for a time over the bank of potted plants and flowers, through the broad window and into the sunshine of the distance. It was still rather well done ; though that was far from inconsistent with the past of Mrs. Ashley Madden.

"It reduces itself to an extremely simple point," Mrs. Madden observed at length. "Do you not think so, Mr. Kairns ?"

"The point ?" he asked, with a trace of a smile.

"Jessie and I arrived at one conclusion, and one only." Mrs. Madden, with the grey shawl loosened from about her throat, was still the middle-aged person who thought of the future with composure. "And it is so simple. Some one person in the house, Mr. Kairns, must have risen after the rest retired and admitted Mr. Hamstead. Beyond that, all is confusion. Have you anything to add to that, Jessie ?"

Miss Burn, appealed to thus directly, appeared to study the matter impartially. Finally she shook her head.

"I was hoping," she said, "that the arrival of Mr. Kairns and Captain Mulvaney might give me a new line of thought ; but it has not reached me yet. Can you suggest anything, Captain ?"

"Unless you heard somebody through the night," Mulvaney returned bluntly.

Miss Burn's raised eyebrows suggested that it was a rather brusque approach.

"My dear Captain," she said, so earnestly that the phrase seemed justified, "do you suppose we would not already have told you if such had been the case?"

Mulvaney flushed slightly.

"That is quite all right, Captain," Miss Burn continued, with less emphasis. "Mrs. Madden and I have discussed that point quite freely. Of course, neither of us heard any sounds through the night, and the only person Mrs. Madden has spoken to on the point is Mr. Madden. He occupies the room adjoining Mrs. Madden's, and, as we expected, he did not hear anything. We have, naturally, acted on the assumption that if any of the guests heard any unusual sounds or felt that he or she had even the slightest clue as to the actual happenings, we would have been informed at once. We are, of course, less certain about the servants. In fact, Captain, we discussed the wisdom of questioning them, but finally decided that the duty should be left to the police. We have, as it were, placed each servant in a position of trust."

Miss Burn continued to look at Mulvaney as though she had presented a report and was waiting for his approval or criticism. Mulvaney was not whole-hearted in either.

"I guess you did all right," he grunted.

"Then Mrs. Madden and I had reached the stage of preparing a list of all inmates of the house last night and jotting down an occasional note." Miss Burn accepted Mulvaney's reply as approval. "We were just at that point when you entered a few minutes ago; so while the list is complete, the notes are rather sketchy. Would you care to see it?"

"Sure would," said Mulvaney, as he reached out a hand.

This is what appeared, in Jessie Burn's handwriting :

HORACE MADDEN : Hasn't any definite viewpoint on the matter.

MRS. ASHLEY MADDEN :

MISS JESSIE BURN :

LEANDER AUGUSTINI : About 35, native of Honduras; probably

has a touch of Spanish blood ; cannot be certain ; rather good at Bridge ; think he gambles.

JASPER KINGDON : Know he gambles ; has 'phone calls every day from a person he calls his "bookie". About 30 ; good sport ; fancies tennis ; thinks this situation a bit of a bore.

DAISY SPENCER : About 28 ; not interested in Kingdon ; had Hollywood experience ; never a front-liner ; given up the idea of being a star, which is fortunate for the public ; not a good-looker ; will probably have to push her own way.

DR. KARL DUNMORE : At least 55 ; archaeologist ; seems to be wholly wrapped up in his profession ; but doesn't make much out of it—who could ?

TUBBY SANGSTER : About 40 ; really pushed himself in on us about six months ago ; pleasant sort ; well named ; no ambition ; doesn't even care for tennis or bridge, but plays when others insist. Useful, but not decorative.

PHIPPS : Butler, perfect ; never had a better. Too good to last ; has been with us three months ; hope he lasts.

LUCY JUPP : Housemaid ; very good, but don't know much about her. Seems elusive.

MRS. WRIGHT : Housekeeper ; the old faithful. How many years ? Must be fifteen at least ; always faithful.

BENITO : Chef, Italian ; had him a year ; knows his place, but particular, like most chefs ; likes a word of praise ; seldom comes upstairs to servants' quarters.

LIZZIE MURDOCK : Village girl.

MARY ROPER : Village girl ; don't know anything about them.

Amor Kairns completed his examination of the list and glanced at Jessie Burn.

"I know it is most ineffectual," Miss Burn apologized. "But possibly it expresses the state of our mind ; not exactly confusion, but uncertainty."

"May I keep the list ?" Kairns asked.

"By all means," Miss Burn assured readily. "I really don't know what we would have done with it, anyway."

Horace Madden dropped into the alcove which was more nearly like a solarium. Miss Burn performed the introductions, and Madden looked rather intently at the shawl about his wife's shoulders. His manner suggested that there may have been a domestic difference over that bit of plain knitting.

Madden seemed an indefinite character. There was

nothing striking about him in appearance; manner, or dress. So far as could be judged, he was just a casual; though the world knew at one time that he was rather well-to-do. At the time of his marriage with the much-married Louise Angus, some of the more brazen tabloids had suggested that he must be extremely well-to-do or he would never have lured the honey-seeking moth. But that was in the days when Mrs. Madden was losing her drive with the public and when her appeal as a publicity-maker was beginning to pale on the newspapers. One tabloid, inclined to be vulgar, had referred to him as "Madden, the coffee merchant, who was never first, but fifth in line". That was his place in life, or had been—a coffee merchant, a big importer, and there were years, as everyone knows, when it did not call for even normal brains to make money in coffee. Of late, he had evidently been just nothing at all, except a honey-maker for Mrs. Madden.

"Devilish stupid affair, eh, Kairns?" he asked, as his glance swung away from Mrs. Madden's grey shawl. "I don't mind a bit of publicity—we had enough of it in the old days, the Lord knows that—but this sort of thing . . ."

Madden flung out a hand rather impatiently. Queerly enough, when it came to rest it seemed to be pointing directly at Mrs. Madden and her shawl. When he became aware of that he permitted his hand to fall sharply.

Kairns merely mumbled his approval, and though his eyes were upon Mrs. Madden, he was unable to detect any indication that she was even aware of anything unusual in her husband's attitude. But Mrs. Madden was, or had been, a clever actress; while Madden did not suggest that he could be particularly clever at anything, other than taking advantage of the opportunities which Fate—or unsound economics—created for him in the coffee market.

"Who the devil is this person Hamstead, anyway?" Madden demanded, much as he might have asked a shipping clerk why the hell he hadn't sent out the proper orders to so-and-so. "That's what I want to know. Not that it means

anything to me ; but what the hell right had any person coming in our house last night ?”

“You needn’t be vulgar about it, Horace,” Mrs. Madden suggested gently. “I am sure Captain Mulvaney and Mr. Cairns will do all they can to find out the identity of Mr. Hamstead.”

“You will, eh ?” Madden demanded of Cairns. He was inclined to ignore Mulvaney. “Well, if there is anything I can do, let me know.”

Madden departed as indefinitely as he had arrived.

Cairns consulted the list of ‘The Briars’ inmates as prepared by Jessie Burn.

“You do not appear to have said much about them,” he suggested. “Doubtless if we had been a trifle later in arriving there might have been more.”

Mrs. Madden and Miss Burn exchanged glances. The latter nodded.

“I am quite positive, my dear Louise,” she remarked, “that we might just as well tell them now. They are certain to find out anyway for themselves ; not that it really matters, but they may as well be informed from the proper angle.”

“I suppose so,” Mrs. Madden conceded, with a slight tug at the grey shawl. “But it seems so silly of Daisy.”

“Silly or otherwise, it is a fact.” Miss Burn developed the controlling mind, and Mrs. Madden went through the gesture of relapsing.

“Then,” said Jessie Burn, with a firm glance at Captain Mulvaney, “you will discover, after you have been here for a certain period, that Daisy Spencer pretends to have what she calls the ‘gift’ ; psychic, if you understand what I mean.”

Mulvaney shrugged his shoulders.

“You’d better say some more,” he replied.

“If you don’t know exactly what I mean, it may be hard to explain.” Miss Burn sought her way cautiously. “You have heard of psycho-analysis and things like that ? Anyway, Daisy—Miss Spencer—has been going about all morning saying she can almost see the scene of murder.

It is silly, I know, precisely as Mrs. Madden says ; but . . . do you think there could be such a thing ?”

Miss Burn's glance swung sharply to Amor Kairns.

“When did she develop the gift ?” Kairns seemed greatly interested. “Rather, when did you first hear of it ?”

“Really, I never heard of it before this morning, but Miss Spencer explained that she has had psychic powers ever since she was a child, and that the gift, as she calls it, manifests itself only at rare intervals. Now that the point has come up . . . and I do not see how it could have been otherwise, we may as well go into it, Mr. Kairns. Mrs. Madden and I were both quite surprised this morning when Miss Spencer walked into the sitting-room where we were and announced that she could see a door opening and a figure passing through. We thought it all a silly joke at the time, but Daisy explained that the psychic gift came upon her at times, and that she could really see most remarkable things with what she called her subconscious mind. I don't know if the girl has merely been reading books on the subject or if she has actually told us the truth. But she says that when she was quite a small child she lived for years with an aunt in a rural community, and that the aunt performed many useful services to her neighbours by finding lost articles, unravelling small mysteries . . . possibly you understand . . . things of that sort.”

Miss Burn paused as though at a loss how to proceed.

“I have read about them plenty of times,” Kairns assured, “but never encountered a case. It is generally old folks and isolated rural communities who go in for such things. Interesting, indeed, if Miss Spencer is serious about the matter.”

“She seems serious.” Miss Burn hesitated somewhat. “It is scarcely a joking matter, and I can hardly believe that even Daisy would consider it as such.”

“Please go on,” Kairns encouraged. “Just what did Miss Spencer assume to see ? I presume she was referring to the incidents through the night ?”

“Nothing except that she could see a door opening and

a figure passing through. It seemed so ridiculous to Mrs. Madden and myself, and the surprise of finding that Daisy professed to have such a gift was so great, that we considered saying nothing about it. That is the reason we hesitated."

"Possibly you should explain," Mrs. Madden suggested, "that Daisy said she would attempt to see more . . . that she has gone off somewhere to be by herself, where she hopes to . . . to concentrate, as she expressed it."

Perhaps Mrs. Madden was an overly capable actress. At any rate, she appeared slightly ashamed at paying any attention whatever to Daisy Spencer's sudden peculiarities. Then abruptly her eyes flashed.

"It is silly—childish!" she exclaimed impatiently; and this time she tugged at the shawl about her throat. "I am irritated almost beyond words to think I should ever have invited Miss Spencer."

The storm came and was gone in an instant. Jessie Burn ignored it; but whether that suggested experience was difficult to judge.

They failed to make further progress. Then a rather listless individual drifted into their midst.

It was not difficult to recognize him as Tubby Sangster, though he looked years younger than the forty which Miss Burn had placed opposite his name. He was dressed in sports knickers, a trifle extreme, and he appeared to think more of the clothes than of the game they represented.

"The tennis games over?" Mrs. Madden asked rather aimlessly, after introductions had confirmed his identity.

"Yes, I've done my daily duty in the interests of harmony," Sangster replied, as he dropped into a chair and presented cigarettes.

"Have one?" he asked, in general.

Both Cairns and Mulvaney accepted so readily that he glanced at them curiously. There was no doubt about the letter S on the paper.

"Big shots, eh, from the city?" Sangster asked, in such an inexpressive manner that the words failed to carry

offence. "Well, I don't blame you. That bird, Thompson, down the alley, couldn't find his place at the dinner-table if the good wife didn't point it out to him. Getting anywhere?"

Kairns did not appear to hear, and that left the answer open to Mulvaney.

"No," he growled.

"Just as I thought." Sangster's indifferent tone suggested that he did not care whether or not they did make progress. "You never do, up to the last minute; then snap, out come the handcuffs and off walks the guilty party. How would you like that, Jessie?"

Miss Burn seemed to find the prospect startling, for she glanced hurriedly at her wrists. Then her glance swung sharply to Tubby Sangster's hands.

"The handcuffs would fit your wrists better than mine," she returned, and Sangster went through the process of easy laughter.

Sangster appeared to be an effortless sort of person. He draped one leg over the arm of his chair in a wholly inartistic and unsocial manner; but, coming from him, it seemed more like a frank search for comfort than a graceless disregard of the courtesies of the occasion. Possibly stout men enjoy privileges which are denied to others; yet Tubby Sangster fell slightly short of being stout. He had a pleasant, good-natured face, and it seemed that Jessie Burn had jotted down an adequate description when she defined him as useful but not decorative.

"Now if you'd ask me," he said, as he considered his cigarette listlessly; then he paused. "But you don't mind, do you, Mrs. Madden? You know you have presented us with a most fascinating topic for conversation, and you haven't whispered as much as a word about it to any of us. Do you think that is being the right kind of a hostess, Mrs. Madden?"

Mrs. Ashley Madden smiled in reply—at least, if it had been completed it would have grown into a smile; but it was forgiving.

"I don't mind in the least, Mr. Sangster," she returned. "If you have any views on the subject, I am certain these gentlemen will be glad of your help."

"Help? My dear lady!" There was the slightest suggestion of energy in the expression, but it was slight. Sangster obviously was not given to effort of any sort. "I haven't any thought of being helpful. Nobody expects that from me; but I did want to gossip. But as I was going to say, gentlemen, if you asked me . . . Now what the blazes was I going to say?"

Sangster's gaze, slightly childish and entirely innocent, journeyed from Mulvaney to Kairns and back again. In the end he seemed to pick upon Mulvaney as the more important of the two.

"I did have an idea, Captain," he confided. "Like my cigarettes? Oh yes, I am a bit fastidious about such things! That is what poor old Phipps would say about it. I am sure Phipps doesn't approve of me smoking initialled cigarettes. Anyway, it's my only weakness."

"Is it?" said Mulvaney, in a tone which left the point open to doubt.

"That, and being genial. Now where was I, Jessie?"

"Miss Burn to you," she returned; but it was doubtful if any of the group other than Jessie Burn knew if she meant it.

Sangster's brows arched, but he did not seem in the least worried about the situation.

"Oh, well!" he returned. "You'll give me credit, gentlemen. I did have an idea. Perhaps I'll think of it later; I'm almost certain to."

Tubby Sangster rose and drifted away as listlessly as he had arrived. Both Mrs. Madden and Jessie Burn watched his retreat.

"You said he actually pushed himself upon you?" Kairns asked, when Sangster was beyond earshot.

Mrs. Madden and Jessie Burn exchanged glances.

"Jessie wrote that," Mrs. Madden replied.

"Meaning that possibly you do not agree?"

"The point is open to reasonable doubt," Mrs. Madden said. "Don't you think so, Jessie?"

"I doubt if there is anything to be gained by reopening the discussion now," Miss Burn returned. "But the situation is this, gentlemen: I am personally convinced that Mr. Sangster is an extremely clever man, in spite of what he may appear. On first acquaintance, and perhaps after much longer acquaintance, you may be disposed to put him down as quite—now what is the word?—toneless? . . . harmless? . . . characterless? . . . Possibly a combination of all three; but I believe that at heart he is much less indifferent than he appears."

"Nonsense, Jessie!"

It was hardly a quarrel, but words developed. It was, perhaps, a friendly difference of opinion, but quite clear-cut. Mrs. Madden clearly accepted Tubby Sangster for the listless individual which showed on the outside. Jessie Burn believed there was something beyond.

They had known him, it developed, for slightly more than a year. Mrs. Madden accepted his introduction as casual and natural; Jessie Burn put it down as "angled". Mrs. Madden admitted that Sangster had paid them more than the normal amount of attention, but she accounted for that by suggesting that it had been convenient for him to do so, and that, through listlessness, he had merely followed the line of least resistance. Jessie Burn shook her head at that. It was, she felt, a deliberate cultivation of the Maddens. But she did not add "for a purpose".

The discussion at least raised a doubt, and Kairns made a mental note of it, while he pondered the letter S on the cigarette-stub which he kept in his fingers instead of throwing it on the tray. Mulvaney, he observed, was doing the same.

A housemaid glided in with tea on a wheeled server. No person had called her, but evidently the domestic economy at The Briars was in capable hands. That broke up the discussion, and Captain Mulvaney seemed glad of it.

The housemaid stared at Mulvaney first, then at Kairns. She was not brazen, but she made the best of her opportunity.

Jessie Burn observed that. Then she frowned at the back of the retreating maid.

"This affair has caused me to do much thinking, Louise," she said, when the maid had disappeared. "Now take that girl, Lucy Jupp. What do we really know about her? She is an attractive young thing, I must admit, but has it ever occurred to you, Louise, that she is too capable?"

"Too capable? My dear Jessie, how could a maid be that?"

"That is just the point. You have found Lucy Jupp not too capable, because you expect much of a maid. Yet she is so much more capable than the average maid that, in reality, she is too capable, if you see what I mean. Think of the contrast with these two village maids taken on a week or so ago."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Madden.

"Yes," said Jessie Burn. "When a maid is all you expect a maid to be, there may be something wrong. Mind you, I only say there *may* be something wrong."

She was looking at Kairns.

"Very clever reasoning," he said. "But you have just started?"

"No, I have nearly finished. This affair has caused me to do much thinking today, and I have arrived at one point. I have realized that there is a striking similarity in the manner in which Lucy Jupp and Phipps reached us, and that they arrived only a few weeks apart."

The similarity, it developed, was positive. The former housemaid resigned and recommended a friend of hers. So Lucy Jupp arrived. Then a few weeks later the former butler resigned, without apparent cause, and recommended a friend of his. And Phipps arrived.

"Things do happen like that, of course." Jessie Burn half apologized for suggesting that the incidents may have been irregular. "And since they have both given such excellent service, nothing occurred to us until now."

She glanced at Mrs. Madden.

"And nothing has occurred to me yet," the latter declared, with emphasis. "You may be discussing them from a highly psychological angle ; they may both be too capable, or not, but it is the first time in years that I have had real service and I am not going to lose them."

Mrs. Madden tugged at the shawl as though she had said "so there". But she didn't say it.

Miss Burn apparently thought Kairns would be interested. For she really apologized this time, both to Kairns and Mrs. Madden, for suggesting that the developments could have been apart from the normal. But she took the grace out of the apology by adding :

"But I didn't mean to imply that the arrivals were planned or that there was collusion."

So she did mean it ; and, despite Mrs. Madden's opposition, she was not taking any chances that Kairns would overlook her meaning.

Mrs. Madden did not seem to have a subtle brain, for she missed the sting in the apology, or, if detecting it, she permitted the matter to pass.

But it was apparent that something was expected of Kairns.

"Then," he said, "since Lucy Jupp and Phipps have been with you for a few months only, they both arrived after Mr. Sangster began paying you somewhat more than normal attention?"

"Yes," said Jessie Burn inquiringly ; but Kairns did not elaborate his meaning. Both women seemed disappointed.

CHAPTER VI

FRICKER arrived, ready for a busy session. They took him directly to the billiard-room where Chief Thompson still occupied the most dusky corner, with a cushion for his only comfort.

Thompson was inclined to complain because there had been no stealthy visits to the room during his period of watching.

"I had a good hide," he said, "so it wasn't my fault. I know how to make hides ; I've done it lots of times after wild duck."

"Maybe these people are wilder," Fricker said, rather airily ; and it was evident he was glad of the opportunity to display his wares.

Edger had found the "young gentleman" who pinned the cardboard star on his chest, so he led them towards the tennis courts after Mulvaney had outlined Fricker's efforts.

"There," said Edger, as he indicated a white-clad figure which slashed at the ball with more than normal skill.

There were only two people on the courts, and the watchers had left. The "young gentlemen" observed Edger's pointing finger, so, after a spirited rally, he broke away.

"I see the rural sleuth has his eye on me," he said, with a smile, as he approached. "If you'll excuse me, gents, this is the last game of a set and we have a five spot on it. It'll be mine in about two minutes, then I'll be right with you."

Mulvaney nodded, and the white-clad figure returned to his game. Both players were unusually capable, and it was more than two minutes before the game was over. During that time it was not particularly difficult to sort them out from the brief notes which Jessie Burn had provided. The younger of the two, who had assaulted

police dignity, had to be Jasper Kingdon. For he was gambling, and he admitted it frankly; and his exertions suggested that he had no thought of throwing away the five spot. His opponent, being slightly older, but still lean and athletic, must be the one with the Spanish blood or something or other in his veins. The dusky shade of his countenance, which did not appear one hundred per cent a matter of recent sunshine, did not make it difficult to believe that he had come from Honduras. So that put him down as Leander Augustini.

The identities were confirmed when the game broke up and the players went over to join the watchers.

"You'll excuse me, gents," Kingdon said glibly, "but I had to have that fiver. August whacks me all to pieces at Bridge, and my only way to keep the account even is to knock a couple of sets out of him each day. What a pity!"

That was directed at Edger, who had removed the cardboard star.

"What a pity!" he repeated. "After all my work."

"You shouldn't have done it." Chief Thompson became quite dignified. "I could have you arrested for contempt."

Young Kingdon became penitent.

"You'll have to accept my apology," he said, so readily that it appeared an apology or two meant little to him. "But it happened during one of my childish streaks. I never grew up, you know."

"I do know," Thompson snapped. "Now what are you going to tell us about this murder?"

"So that's the issue at stake?" He became more serious. "I thought so. Rural police . . . and, of course . . . I beg your pardon, gents. City police, I see. What can I do for you? And what can August do for you?"

Leander Augustini apparently had little to say when in Kingdon's company. The latter evidently did not encourage it. Besides, he seemed more reserved, but there was no suggestion of inferiority in his manner. He was, in fact, typical of the higher class in the southern countries—dusky,

but dignified and alert, regarding himself as the equal of any, but not making the point too obvious.

It developed that there was little which either Kingdon or Augustini could, or would, do for them. They were sympathetic, puzzled, mystified. . . . Kingdon almost seemed on the point of saying horrified, but he broke the word off before he finished it. They even asked polite questions as to progress which had been made, but at the same time it was evident that they regarded themselves as beyond the pale of murder and were content to leave matters in the hands of the police.

Captain Mulvaney suggested that if they really thought matters over they might fall upon some small point which might be useful. For instance, when were they last in the billiard-room, and what did they see out of the ordinary?

"Now, Captain," Kingdon rebuked, "if you are working up a gambling charge against us you couldn't go about it in a better way. Fact of the matter is we spent half the evening in the billiard-room shooting pool at a dollar a game. Tennis and pool. They're my strong spots; but August hooks me hard at Bridge."

Kingdon grinned so boyishly that it seemed he could not keep his mind on murder.

"It's a pleasure," said Augustini, with a suggestion of a bow.

As nearly as they remembered, the french windows were open when they left the billiard-room. But that did not help much; so they promised to think things over. Then they left to change from their sports clothes.

Chief Thompson stared at the departing figures. He seemed to be trying to adopt an air of sagacity, but fell short of the mark.

"I could arrest them," he said, "on a gambling charge. That'd be something. . . . It's more'n a year since I had a chance to arrest anybody, and they're strangers to the district."

The Chief appeared slightly wistful.

"You should encourage more visitors," Mulvaney

suggested. "But I tell you what, Chief: if we ever get as far as making an arrest in this affair, we'll have you do it."

Thompson was satisfied.

"I suppose we shouldn't hurry," he said. "But we'll keep it in mind, for they've already confessed."

They had come opposite a cluster of dwarf cedar.

"Hah!" said a voice from beyond the cedar. "Confessed, eh?"

A few steps brought them face to face with Deacon Jones. The man's eyes seemed alight with eagerness.

"Confessed, have they, Chief?"

"Well, Mr. Jones, it's as good as a confession, though the foreign-looking chap didn't exactly admit anything the young fellow said. But I could bring a charge against them."

"Good!" said Deacon Jones, with some of the fire of the crusader in his eyes. "I'll go get the gaol ready. . . ."

Deacon Jones was striding away almost before they realized that he had been with them. For a deacon of the church, he was gifted with considerable activity, for his long legs fairly twinkled in the sunshine.

"Now what the blazes was he doing here?" Thompson asked in aggrieved tones. "Snooping, I'll bet."

"Possibly an extremely good guess," Cairns suggested. "But hasn't it occurred to you, Chief, that there is a possibility of a misunderstanding developing in Burleigh?"

"I suppose so," Thompson agreed. "It wouldn't be the first time. But I could arrest them for gambling, if the Deacon says so. He's death on gambling. If you don't think so, you should hear him at a Wednesday night prayer-meeting—I have to go once in a while." The Chief appeared slightly embarrassed. "You know, he has a lot to say about things in Burleigh."

Deacon Jones had already made considerable progress. He had reached the main driveway leading to The Briars, and as Cairns watched him for a moment, he met and passed two figures coming from the direction of the village. So far as could be judged from the distance, Jones did little more than glance in their direction.

"What I meant," Kairns added, "was that there is a possibility that the Deacon has a false impression. You, of course, Chief, were talking about gambling, but there is just a chance that the Deacon's mind was on murder."

"Good Lord !" said Chief Thompson in affrighted tones. "You think so ? And you're right. That's the reason he's streaking it so ; for any time he can beat Mamie Fargo in breaking the news . . ."

The Chief doubtless intended to finish the sentence, but he did not. Instead, he merely said "Excuse me," and departed in the path which Deacon Jones had so recently taken.

"The Chief's purpose is clear," Kairns observed, as he watched the race for a moment. "But isn't it clear, Captain, that the Deacon is going to make the village by at least a hundred and fifty yards the lead ? And that should give him a chance to tell at least one person ; possibly more. I fear, Captain, that the church of Burleigh has a most solid foundation."

The new arrivals had walked up the driveway and paused opposite them. They were a man and a woman. From the distance, possibly twenty-five yards, it appeared that there was the utmost politeness between them. But in a moment the woman broke away and continued up the driveway towards the residence, while the man awaited their arrival.

"One guess, Captain, as to his identity," Kairns remarked.

"From that flare of whiskers and general shaggy air, he has to be one of two things," Mulvaney decided. "Either a new member of the Burleigh gossip club, or Dr. Karl Dunmore. Whiskers of that sort would fit an archaeologist."

The guess, it developed, was accurate, for it was Dr. Dunmore.

When Kairns and Mulvaney reached him he seemed torn between two interests. He was observing them as though they were new specimens which had suddenly reached his gaze, and he was likewise interested in the

figure of the woman who had just nicely reached the main doorway of The Briars.

"Damned impertinent," he said, and as he spoke two rows of only partly white teeth showed plainly between the red flames of his lips. The whiskers were a violent red. They would have been sufficiently commanding if they had received the most cautious care; but under the circumstances they were almost an affront. The man was the first member of The Briars house-party who had not appeared immaculately groomed, and his race in the opposite direction was so striking as to seem almost bizzare. "Shaggy" was perhaps the only clear-cut word which could describe Dr. Karl Dunmore; while the flame of his whiskers suggested an uncontrolled disposition, and the sparkle of his bright-blue eyes advertised a spirit of youth which had survived the years.

"Damned impertinent!" he repeated. "Didn't you hear me?"

That was aimed at Mulvaney. But the latter seemed quite at ease with such a character.

"Yes," he replied. "But we were just admiring your judgment and attempting to figure if you meant us or the sweet young thing who has just left you."

"She isn't sweet, and she isn't young," Dunmore retorted. "She's just an impertinent young hussy."

"A bit mixed," Mulvaney suggested. "But I thought so."

"So you know her? And the young minx said she didn't know you from Adam. She just told me so."

"No. But as a guess, I would say she was Daisy Spencer."

"Of course she is. Who else could be so impertinent? And you knew it all the time, so don't try to take any credit for being smart. But what I want to know is, what does she mean by telling me she has had a vision of a figure leaving a room at night?"

"She's psychic," Mulvaney suggested.

"Psychic? My grandmother's tom-cat! Yowling to the same end."

Dr. Dunmore leered, and his glittering whiskers sparkled with relish.

"She'll queer herself, that's what she'll do," he rushed on. "I'll blackball her."

"That would be a pity." Mulvaney felt his way cautiously.

"Of course it would. Mrs. Madden would sling her out of the party . . . just like that."

Dr. Dunmore flicked a finger; and it was not difficult to imagine Daisy Spencer flitting through the air. Mulvaney remained discreetly silent. He felt that possibly he was upon the verge of the unknown.

The silence encouraged Dr. Dunmore to proceed; but he did not. Instead, he stared at the front doorway of The Briars through which Daisy Spencer had disappeared.

"The party?" said Kairns ruminatively.

"Of course," Dunmore snapped suddenly. "It's bad enough to have to go to a hell of a hole like that without having to drag along a she-cat like Daisy Spencer. She'd have us all up in the air inside a month, and I'm going to tell Mrs. Madden she can choose between me and Spencer."

Dr. Dunmore jerked his bushy whiskers. Then abruptly he appeared to remember, in belated fashion, that possibly there are times when a person should think first, then speak some time later.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Kairns explained.

"Ho!" said Dr. Dunmore, as though sucking at his breath. "A pretty kettle of fish! Police flocking down on us. Newspapers had us on the 'phone already. That'll break up the party . . . maybe."

"On the contrary," Kairns hastened to assure, "it will do just the opposite. We will most assuredly insist that the party remain intact until we have arrived at our conclusions."

"What are you talking about?" Dr. Dunmore demanded. "Oh, I see! Well, I'm no tattle-tale, and if Mrs. Madden

hasn't told you, you couldn't squeeze it out of me with red-hot pincers. So don't try."

As if to discourage further efforts, Dr. Dunmore turned his back on them and walked rapidly towards The Briars. Kairns and Mulvaney watched until he disappeared around a corner of the rambling structure; then Mulvaney kicked at a cluster of grass.

"Almost got something, didn't we, Amor?" he asked. "Curious, isn't it? What do you take from it?"

"Don't know," Kairns replied; then corrected himself. "For one thing, that Dr. Dunmore was talking about one party and we were talking about another. And the peppery doctor at least thinks Mrs. Madden has failed to part with some information."

Since there didn't seem to be anything which could be done about it at the moment, they walked up the driveway towards The Briars. But Phipps, it appeared, was a mind-reader. He again held open the door for them to enter. And another glance at Phipps' athletic figure and bronzed cheeks suggested that possibly a few months would delimit his period of service, precisely as Jessie Burn had indicated.

"You play golf?" Kairns asked.

"On every possible occasion, sir," Phipps returned. "I am possibly over fond of the open air."

So that was at least a counter thrust. It could explain surface appearances. And probably the rest could be better left for the future.

"We wished to speak to Miss Spencer," Kairns explained the call.

"The lady has just arrived," Phipps informed. "If you will step this way, sir . . ."

Phipps indicated a reception-room.

"By the way, Phipps," Kairns suggested, "just what is this party all about?"

"Party, sir? There are guests. I had not heard it defined as a party."

"Certainly not, Phipps. Then just what party was, or is, being planned?"

Phipps stepped to the doorway of the reception-room. It appeared that he was departing in search of Daisy Spencer. But that, it developed, was not entirely accurate. For he paused just outside the doorway, looked carefully in several directions, then returned and closed the door behind him.

"My duties, sir, are varied," he said, in apologetic tones. "I am engaged by Mrs. Ashley Madden as butler, but I still feel that I owe a duty to the police. Mrs. Madden has not confided in me, sir, as to the nature of the party which is being planned, and my instinctive restraint has not prompted me to be curious. But I fear I cannot say the same for Lucy Jupp, the housemaid. She not only has a pronounced strain of curiosity, but her hearing is acute. So, without wishing to be rude to Miss Jupp, I have been forced to acquire the information that Mrs. Madden is planning an expedition of some sort. To Honduras, I believe, sir. Miss Jupp's hearing did not inform her as to the precise purpose of the expedition, though she assured me that Miss Burn would become active . . . again."

There was the faintest pause before the last word, and Phipps' countenance, though not changed in the slightest degree, somehow managed to suggest that the word was important.

"Miss Jupp has also informed me," he added, "that the present guests at The Briars are the proposed members of the expedition to Honduras. Miss Jupp's curiosity may have distorted her judgment, but she informs me that the purpose of the present gathering at The Briars is to determine if the party would be harmonious. You wished to see Miss Spencer, sir?"

Phipps opened the door and departed as efficiently as though he had never paused in the routine of his duties.

Kairns looked at Mulvaney, and there was a pronounced smile on his lips.

"We are," he observed, "quite fortunate in Miss Jupp's hearing. In this case we do not doubt its accuracy, since Dr. Dunmore has more or less confirmed it by suggesting

an outlet for his peppery temper. His proposed blackmailing of Daisy Spencer becomes readable, eh, Mulvaney?"

"I guess so," Mulvaney conceded. "But . . . Phipps again. His efficiency is amazing."

"Miss Jupp's efficiency, you mean. And curious, is it not, that Miss Jupp and Phipps should have arrived at The Briars within a few weeks of each other, and under circumstances which Jessie Burn believes to be slightly abnormal? We are progressing, Mulvaney."

"I suppose so. But where?"

"I hope not to Honduras. And with Jessie Burn again active, what does that suggest, Mulvaney?"

"Publicity. Front-page headlines. Mrs. Madden must have the itch again . . . I mean she must have the—what should I call it?—the old yearning. . . ."

He might have said more, but Phipps returned. Daisy Spencer was with him. She seemed to be a wide-eyed and innocent young thing; though, in view of her Hollywood experience, the word "seemed" may have been well chosen.

Phipps left them. He also left the door ajar. But when Mulvaney stepped to the door and peered into the hallway, there was no Phipps in sight. He shook his head doubtfully, and almost but just failed to say something about Lucy Jupp.

Perhaps it was Daisy Spencer's wide eyes which checked the words on his lips. Miss Spencer, apparently, was attempting to play the baby role. But the success which greeted her efforts explained precisely why Jessie Burn had described her as not a front-liner. She did not seem even a second-liner; though possibly she might have been a third-rater.

"You wished to see me?" she said, with the baby-eyed effort evident, and that left her decidedly not above a third-rater.

"I do not wish to be impertinent," Kairns remarked, "but I have been trying to recall you in the pictures, and my memory does not serve me."

"Now don't it? You poor thing. But I think I have

you right. This other square-jawed person must be Captain Mulvaney."

The latter nodded; though he was not accustomed to thinking of himself as square-jawed.

"I had a bet on it with Tubby Sangster, and I win. Oh, you poor thing!" She swung back to Kairns, and the voice tried to be mothering. "But you didn't come here to talk about poor little me."

"Indeed we did," Kairns assured. "You're psychic, they say."

"Now isn't that too sweet for words?"—with emphasis on the "too". "I was wondering if they believed me around here, when I am so sincere and truthful. You know how they are, hard-boiled. They pick up their ears . . . not actually . . . but you know what I mean. And that Dr. Dunmore."

Kairns nodded sympathetically.

"Doesn't believe you at all?" he said.

"Doesn't he? He must be deceptive; for I thought he did. Has the naughty man been saying things about me?" It was far from well done; though Miss Spencer reinforced it with the baby stare.

"So you won't say?" she went on, as though she feared it might be true. "But you will believe me, now, won't you?"

Daisy Spencer moved slightly closer, with that cuddling motion so often to be seen in the pictures, but which is far from real.

"Absolutely," Kairns assured; and when she turned towards Mulvaney, he added, "You bet."

"I like real men," she said. "You know what I mean . . . real men. So I am psychic. I don't understand it at all; but I did *sense* a figure passing through a doorway at night. They've told you that?"

"Is that as far as your psychic memory has gone?" Kairns asked.

"Yes, you poor thing, it is; but it will go farther. I know."

"Sure?"

The baby eyes widened.

"Sure thing. I know. I have the feeling. I know the rest of the scene will come. It's only a matter of hours."

Amor Kairns considered her for some time. She was, of course, acting, or at least attempting to do so. But the results would be the same, so far as her place in the Hamstead murder was concerned.

"You will pardon a bit of advice," he said—"elderly advice?"

"Now isn't that too sweet! . . . What is it, you poor thing?"

"That if you should remember the balance of the scene, you will exercise much discretion as to where you place your information."

Daisy Spencer looked away from Kairns, towards Captain Mulvaney, as though some great mystery had been sprung upon her, and as if Mulvaney might provide some enlightenment. To all surface appearances she was the innocent young thing who had so recently irritated Dr. Dunmore, and this time it was done much better than earlier.

"Who should I tell?" she asked, quite confidently. "The police, of course; that's it." It was said as though a great light had reached her; but there was no particular conviction back of the words.

"Of course," Kairns advised. "But . . . remember this, Miss Spencer . . . for your own sake, and quite apart from the fact that we represent the police, I would suggest that you use considerable restraint. Recall the scene, by all means——"

"Oh, Mr. Kairns!" The voice was greatly surprised. "How could you say it that way? Not *recall* it. You naughty man! No, not *recall* it, but *sense* it."

She was, possibly, slightly more clever than Kairns had been willing to concede. For there was a positive, all-important distinction between the two words.

"Then *sense* it, by all means," Kairns bowed his tribute. "You astonish me, Miss Spencer."

"Yes, I know, you poor thing. You under-estimated me. I could see it in your eyes. Deep grey eyes. I like real men. But you mustn't mind if I interrupt. That is the part I play in the movies; it is so natural to me . . . the impetuous child, never brought up, just grew up, childlike and eager. You remember me now?"

Kairns did not attempt to answer that one.

"I believe I finished all I was about to say," he replied. "Advice . . . elderly advice to the impetuous child who never grew up would be that she should *sense* the balance of the night scene, by all means, but be extremely careful with the details. You care to tell us now, Miss Spencer?"

"Oh, Mr. Kairns! Now, is that nice? I know you didn't mean it that way. But is it nice?"

But Kairns had meant it that way. Daisy Spencer seemed fully aware of that point, but she had apparently decided to rely on her Hollywood experience. For if she had real information she did not consider this the time to part with it. There was, somehow, a vague suggestion that she might be bargaining; but in the end she was effusive in her assurance that if, or when, she sensed the balance of the night scene she would be certain that the police learned of it first.

"For your own good," Kairns insisted; and Daisy Spencer departed with the baby stare still prominent and with another "You poor thing".

Fricker was in the main hallway. He had evidently made progress and was enthusiastic over the possibilities. For, as he expressed it, he had run into a "regular nest" of finger-prints. They had, doubtless, all been made by some members of the household, or by Hamstead, the deceased; and to Fricker the next step was clear.

The finger-print specialist had youth and enthusiasm on his side, and judging by his attitude, he had rarely run into a situation which presented such opportunity to his angle of the police business.

"I have taken the liberty," he said, "of informing our butler boy friend that we will need the whole household lined up for their prints. Then we will compare the specimens, and there we are. Or where are we?"

Phipps, it appeared, had already departed to inform Mrs. Madden of the situation.

"He took it like a sport," Fricker declared. "Fact of the matter is, he volunteered his prints on the spot. So I took them first, and that is out of the way."

Phipps came down the broad stairway, with expressionless countenance and with calm, butler-like tread. Mrs. Madden, he informed, had given her instructions that Fricker was to have every possible assistance, and already he, Phipps, was on his way to round up the members of the household. He said it in a wholly impersonal way, but there was no doubting his intentions.

"I think we can safely leave you in Phipps' hands," Kairns decided. "And now, Captain, there is a matter or two we might look into."

One of the matters was to have a look at the exact spot where Ted Baxter, the errant schoolboy, had found the revolver in question. That necessitated a trip to the village; but they had not quite reached the centre of Burleigh activity when there was an interruption.

A woman darted from somewhere and ran the risk of being swept into eternity by Mulvaney's car. She at least brought them to a full stop, and when the temporary confusion cleared up it was evident that the arrival was Miss Mamie Fargo.

Despite her experience, Miss Fargo was cool and collected, though her shrewd old eyes were sparkling.

"You'll excuse me," she said, with a bob of her grey head as Kairns thrust open the door of the car, "but there are times when a person must do her duty, even if there is a little risk. Aunt Sarah Jane and I have been talking it over, and we just decided to wait for you and save you a trip into the village."

The trip was so brief that it could scarcely have mattered.

But, at any rate, a glance at the spot which Mamie Fargo indicated revealed Aunt Sarah Jane. She occupied a comfortable chair on the lawn, quite close to the sidewalk, and just beyond her was a doorway which bore the nameplate of Dr. Thorley. She was apparently slightly more advanced in years than Mamie Fargo, but that did not seem to have deadened her enthusiasm for passing events.

"Aunt Sarah Jane isn't very active," Miss Fargo explained. "Troubled with the rheumatism; and as I have said to Dr. Thorley a score of times, that isn't very good advertising for his business. . . . But that isn't what I wanted. We were wondering if you have found out who this Mr. Hamstead is . . . or was?"

Mamie Fargo cocked her head at an inquisitive angle, and back of it was an air of wisdom.

"I fear we haven't," Kairns assured, though Mulvaney was inclined to be impatient.

"Neither have we," Miss Fargo decided to ignore Mulvaney for the meantime. "But Aunt Sarah Jane and I have been talking it over, and we just wondered, you know, as women will, if there was anything in what that Smith girl says. You know, Suzy Smith, a sort of uppish young thing; but I know she's glad to get the three days' work a week from Mrs. Anderson. Anyway, Aunt Sarah Jane and I thought it might amount to something."

Kairns waited politely for her to proceed. She was apparently enjoying the situation.

"It was last week," said Mamie Fargo at length, after receiving an encouraging nod from Aunt Sarah Jane. "You know how young folks are these days. Anyway, Suzy was out walking with Herbie Austin, the butcher boy, and . . . and I don't know that they should have been where they were. It was after dark . . ."

Mamie Fargo apparently tried to blush, but made an extremely poor attempt.

"It was after dark," she hurried on, and that took the place of a real maidenly blush, "back by the fair grounds

... quite a lonely spot . . . And who do you suppose they saw?"

That sentence ended rather brightly, as though Miss Fargo had successfully passed the more vulgar phase of life.

"You interest me, Miss Fargo," Kairns assured, and Mulvaney was no longer inclined to be impatient.

"Mr. Hamstead." Miss Fargo announced that with a ring of triumph. "He was out walking . . . and Suzy says they had quite a walk . . . I mean Mr. Hamstead and the person with him. So I guess Suzy and Herbie must have been walking too, or they wouldn't have noticed that."

That came rather reflectively, as though possibly she and Aunt Sarah Jane may have misinterpreted the intentions which took Suzy and Herbie to a lonely spot after dark.

"Ah!" said Kairns, to encourage Miss Fargo's drama.

"I thought you would appreciate the point." Miss Fargo gave a sharp nod of her grey head. "Mr. Hamstead is dead, but the person who walked with him isn't dead."

"So they knew Hamstead's companion?" Kairns asked.

"Yes, they did," Miss Fargo fairly snapped at the point. "And I'm not a bit surprised; not a bit, though Aunt Sarah Jane didn't quite believe it at first. But as I said to her, there isn't a reason in the world why Suzy and Herbie should be mistaken."

"And the person?" Kairns encouraged.

"Yes, you've seen him." Miss Fargo prolonged the relish. "It's that butler person up at The Briars."

CHAPTER VII

No, there could be no doubt of it. Miss Fargo was certain of that. For she had questioned Suzy Smith during the last hour in the presence of Mrs. Anderson, and they had agreed that the girl was not manufacturing the incident.

"It is her day on at the Andersons', and you'll be wanting to see her," Miss Fargo suggested broad-mindedly, as though her statement did not necessarily carry any weight; and she nodded briskly when Kairns agreed.

"It is a good point," she said, with a reassuring nod at Aunt Sarah Jane, who, from the distance of the lawn, seemed to be keeping a remarkably close check on events.

"Remarkably fine," Kairns granted.

"Much better than the one Deacon Jones had a while ago." Miss Fargo had a way of emphasizing her points with a nod of her grey head. "Though some of the people down at the village think the mistake was entirely Sam Thompson's fault. But as I have said to Aunt Sarah Jane, one must compare the characters of the Deacon and the Chief before deciding which was at fault. You have heard, of course, that Deacon Jones gave orders to have the gaol prepared, and that Sam Thompson arrived a few minutes later and explained there was a mistake about the confession?"

"Yes," Kairns returned. "But surely Mr. Jones did not beat the Chief to the village by some minutes?"

"About three minutes, Mr. Wilkes says. He is the garage man, and on the council. But Mr. Jones got a ride in a car; that explains it; Sam Thompson had to walk; though he says he shouted to Mr. Jones but couldn't make him hear. Yes, Mr. Jones ordered the gaol prepared."

Mamie Fargo did not laugh at the incident. She did not really smile, though there was a faint twitching about

her lips. Miss Fargo evidently could take her amusement quietly.

"It will cause some friction, of course," she added, "but I doubt if it will be serious. Mr. Jones really has a charitable spirit. We have worked together in the church, and that is how I come to understand his character. And as I have said to Aunt Sarah Jane, he's permitted one of his least generous streaks to get the upper hand of him for a time. I think I understand Deacon Jones. . . . But you are not interested in that."

Kairns did not dispute the point, though he assured Miss Fargo he would call upon Suzy Smith if she considered the hour suitable.

"Quite," Miss Fargo agreed. "I know Mrs. Anderson will be expecting you. So we are seeing along the same lines, Mr. Kairns?"

"In what respect, Miss Fargo?"

Miss Fargo's eyes were shrewdly speculative.

"I believe we both realize, Mr. Kairns," she said, "that the police will have made much progress when they learn why Mr. Hamstead was here."

Kairns appeared astonished.

"You mean to say the village doesn't know the reason? Why, Miss Fargo, I thought——"

Kairns broke off as though slightly confused.

"That is quite all right, Mr. Kairns," Miss Fargo hastened to assure him. "I don't blame you in the least. And I admit that we should have known; but we don't. As I said to Sam Thompson this forenoon, after Mr. Edger was placed on guard up at The Briars, if we had paid more attention to our duty as citizens and learned the purpose of Mr. Hamstead's visit to Burleigh, we might have prevented the murder. But you know how people are in small villages—slow to act."

"Possibly you shouldn't blame yourselves too seriously," Kairns sympathized.

"Aunt Sarah Jane agrees with me on that point." Miss Fargo's head was nodded vigorously this time. "But we

don't know a single thing about Mr. Hamstead of any importance. Mr. Trevor, that's the postmaster, told me from the first that Mr. Hamstead didn't get any mail, and Mrs. Parsons is absolutely certain he didn't have any long-distance calls."

Miss Fargo paused, as though waiting for approval. Kairns extended it rather warmly.

"Of course," Miss Fargo accepted the compliment with a smile which made her thin, pointed face seem rather pleasant, "while the village as a whole was derelict in its duty and is open to censure, a few of us were not entirely inactive. But we lacked the support to learn anything important."

"It is so often the way," Kairns lamented. "But possibly some little points came to your attention."

"Yes, they did." Mamie Fargo seemed to leap at the opening. "But they were small—very small indeed. Though Aunt Sarah Jane and I have considered that possibly the mere lack of information may be significant."

"It could be," Kairns encouraged.

"Mr. Wilkes, you know, the garage man, is positive Mr. Hamstead never used a car, and he did not have one of his own. He merely came by bus one afternoon and went direct to the Orient Hotel."

"How long ago would that be?"

"Two weeks to the day he was murdered. . . . I checked my memory this forenoon by telephoning Mrs. Baxter; you know, she runs the Orient Hotel. Mrs. Baxter told me Mr. Hamstead had only the one handbag, which did not leave him much spare clothing, though he carried a topcoat over his arm. Mrs. Baxter is quite observant. . . ."

Miss Fargo paused, but when there was nothing in Kairns' manner to suggest that it was an offence on Mrs. Baxter's part, Miss Fargo hurried on:

"Circumstances have forced her to be observant," she said. "With one or two people stepping out without paying their bills, she has been obliged to study her guests.

Anyway, Mrs. Baxter informed me that Mr. Hamstead's linen seemed of unusually good quality, and anyone in Burleigh will tell you that he always appeared well dressed. He was quite generous, too, at the table; tipped the waitress ten cents each day. Mr. Hamstead seemed to be a gentleman of good breeding and not short of funds. Though really we don't know a thing about him."

Miss Fargo's brows puckered speculatively.

"So Mrs. Baxter did not make further observations?"

"Indeed she did not; though of course, if she had, it would have been entirely casual. But if she had chanced to observe any papers or anything of that nature, she would have spoken of it, now that this terrible thing has happened." Miss Fargo shook her head slowly. "And to think he appeared so usual in his habits, took a walk each day about the village, sometimes a mile or two into the country; but we are quite certain he never met any person . . . except, of course, the butler up at The Briars that one night . . . and . . ."

Mamie Fargo's face brightened suddenly.

"Oh!" she said. It was almost an accusation. "How did I come to forget that? It is so interesting. I remember now that Mr. Trevor told me—you know, the post-master—that one night he thought he saw Mr. Hamstead on The Briars grounds."

"Ho!" said Kairns, and the tone was highly complimentary.

"Yes"—Mamie Fargo jerked her head with relish—"and I forgot to tell Aunt Sarah Jane. How could I have been so stupid? Now, let me think. It must have been a couple of nights after Suzy and Herbie saw Mr. Hamstead and the butler together out by the fair grounds. Mr. Trevor was late sorting his mail and was on his way home. He believed, but he could not be entirely positive, that it was Mr. Hamstead on The Briars grounds. But I can credit it, Mr. Kairns, it was so like what Suzy said."

"And what was that?"

"That Mr. Hamstead and the butler strolled up and

down together by the fair grounds, then parted and returned to the village by different streets. They could do that so easily, you know."

Mamie Fargo apparently was keen to her surroundings, for with an "Excuse me, I'll be back in a moment", she crossed to the watching figure of Aunt Sarah Jane on Dr. Thorley's lawn. There was a brief conversation; then Miss Fargo returned.

"Aunt Sarah Jane wants to know," she said, "if you have learned that Mrs. Ashley Madden brought some of her jewels to Burleigh about six weeks ago?"

Captain Mulvaney seemed startled; and Miss Mamie Fargo was undoubtedly gratified.

"Yes," she said. "Aunt Sarah Jane had it from the banker's wife. Mrs. Madden keeps the jewels in the bank vault most of the time, but occasionally she has them up at the house. I wonder why?"

Kairns could not answer that one; but it was evident that Mamie Fargo's stock of information was running short. For she began to glance up and down the street somewhat hungrily, as if searching for more. Then she returned to Aunt Sarah Jane with the air of one who has done her duty.

"What a remarkable people!" said Kairns, as Mulvaney resumed the brief drive to the village.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN they reached the centre of the village, Deacon Jones had temporarily taken the law in his own hands. He was apparently smarting from his hasty interpretation of the Chief Thompson confession incident, for his eyes were baleful, his cheeks were flushed, and he had captured the Baxter boy.

The boy, a twelve-year-old or so, was backed up against the village garage, and while a scattered gathering watched, Deacon Jones attempted to put him through his paces. He was wanting to know most of all what the boy was doing at the particular spot where the revolver was found when it was so far from the normal route between his home and the school. The youth may have been frightened, or it may merely have been some instinctive outcropping of hostility between the Jones and the Baxter families; at any rate, the Deacon was not making progress, and that did not tend to ease the flush of his cheeks—though it did appear to add to the amusement of the spectators.

"I guess, Deacon," said a man, obviously Wilkes, the garage-keeper, "we'll have to use the gaol after all."

The Deacon must have found that disconcerting, for his unchurchmanlike eyes swung upon Wilkes, and the spectators expressed their appreciation in a manner which did not increase his calm. Ted Baxter grasped the opening, darted under the Deacon's arm, and was away before Burleigh's councillor could counter the move. No one attempted to stop the boy; and the Deacon, recognizing defeat, resigned himself ungracefully to the situation.

The gathering scattered; but Wilkes remained.

He nodded carelessly towards Mulvaney and Kairns, then grinned and made his approaches.

"But there is a point to what the Deacon says," he remarked, and Kairns waited politely for him to proceed.

"I don't mean," said Wilkes, as he tugged at overalls which had recently seen close contact with the internals of a car, "that the Deacon has any right to be insinuating that the Baxter boy had knowledge aforehand when he went out of his way to pick up the revolver—but—well—it's sort of queer; but I guess that's your job."

Kairns remained noncommittal.

"Funny, isn't it," Wilkes resumed, "about the initials on the revolver? There ain't any secret about that now, and I wouldn't be surprised if Madden heard about it any minute."

"So they were Madden's initials?" Kairns asked.

Wilkes assumed an air of wisdom.

"I wouldn't go so far as that," he returned cautiously. "All I would say is that the initials are *H.M.*, and so are his. Well, Mr. Kairns, if there is anything the council can do for you, don't hesitate to let us know. Even to getting the gaol ready."

Wilkes was grinning as he retreated to the interior of the garage, and it was not difficult to believe that Deacon Jones would be called upon to display some heroic feat before he could live down the confession incident.

They took up quarters at the Orient Hotel, having no choice in the matter—and that, coupled with the process of reserving a spare room for Fricker to develop his fingerprints, brought them into such contact with Mrs. Baxter that the landlady felt justified in talking.

"Deacon Jones," she said, when the arrangements were completed, "has made himself utterly ridiculous. Not that it means anything to me, Mr. Kairns, but I fully realize he has been hinting that Ted had some special reason for going past that bit of woods and picking up the revolver. As if *I* had anything to do with Mr. Hamstead's murder! Oh, I know, he isn't saying *that*. But he is saying it is queer to think that Ted should have been there, right at the spot where the revolver had been thrown, when he should

have been at school. Deacon Jones is not kindly towards us, Mr. Cairns, because we secured a licence for a beer-parlour, contrary to his opposition. He may be a good churchman—but what do you think about it, Captain?”

“Don’t ask me.” Mulvaney backed hurriedly away from the situation. “Murder is bad enough without that.”

“So it is, Captain. But if Deacon Jones had used any judgment whatever, he wouldn’t have attacked Ted the way he did. Yes, he really attacked Ted . . . hurt his arm, the way he tugged at him. Ted isn’t a bad boy. He may not be very good, but he isn’t really bad. . . . Oh, Ted!”

The boy appeared. It seemed he had been waiting for the summons. So far as could be observed, Mrs. Baxter was fair to her son. He did not seem either particularly good or particularly bad; just the average run of twelve-year-old.

“Now, Ted,” she said, “you are not afraid of these gentlemen?”

Ted grinned.

“Naw,” he said; “they’re police. I’m going to be a policeman myself some day. I’m going to be a real detectuf—the best there is.”

“You have made a good start,” Mulvaney encouraged, and Ted warmed to the situation.

“Now, Ted,” Mrs. Baxter added, “you tell the gentlemen just what you were doing when you found the revolver.”

“Sure thing; but you don’t think I’d tell that old Deacon Jones. I was playing hookey, that’s what I was doing. I figured I’d go into the woods and cut a fishing-pole, and I was just nosing along the edge of the woods looking for a good pole to cut when I stumbled on to the revolver. But I didn’t go fishing.”

Mulvaney nodded understandingly.

“Because you had found something better?” he suggested; and Ted grinned again. The boy, apparently, was already developing a taste for the limelight.

"And if you don't mind, Ted," Kairns added, "we would like to see exactly where you found the revolver."

Mulvaney drove to the spot, under the boy's directions. The route did not matter. It was clearly out of line with the highway to the school. The small woods, possibly an acre or more, was part of The Briars property. It was strung along a roadway branching from the main village highway, though one corner of the wooded lot practically touched the roadway intersection, and it was possibly forty rods or so from The Briars rambling residence.

Ted Baxter walked directly to a spot and pointed. He knew it because of a definite limb which had caught his eye as a possible fishing-pole, and he indicated the limb. It was practically in the open, not in the main woods at all; and when Mulvaney scouted round he reported within a minute or two that there was a pathway a few feet farther on leading from The Briars to the cross-road.

"Dashed funny!" he said, with a glance at Kairns, as though wondering at the wisdom of discussing matters in the presence of the keen-eyed boy.

"The revolver, of course," Kairns suggested, "was fairly well hidden, Ted. You just found it by chance. Say, your foot struck it."

"No, sir; nothing of the sort. It was lying out there in plain sight, just where I say."

"Not even a leaf or stick over it?"

"Naw," said Ted. "It looked to me like it fell out of somebody's pocket. A kid could have hid it better than that."

Ted Baxter had nothing more to show them, though by this time he was becoming quite eager. His first glimpse at the work of a real detective was making his eyes sparkle.

"Deacon Jones is just jealous of me," he said on the way back, and when they left the boy at his home and drove on to the undertaker's establishment it became evident that the Deacon was at least attempting to retrieve his reputation.

Dr. Thorley had completed the post-mortem, and he

was sitting in the undertaker's office discussing matters quite freely with the Deacon. Thorley had evidently kept his promise to recover the bullet which had led to the death of Roger Hamstead, but he apparently had little appreciation of the fact that it was not his property or the property of Deacon Jones.

There was a revolver on the desk between them. Several cartridges were in plain sight, while the bullet and powder had been removed from one, and they were comparing the bullet with some object in the Deacon's hand.

Deacon Jones' eyes grew brighter as Kairns and Mulvaney stepped in and looked down upon the scene.

"That," said Deacon Jones importantly, as he opened his right hand and displayed an object in the palm, "is the bullet which killed Hamstead. And it came from this revolver."

Captain Mulvaney was suddenly angry.

"A ballistic expert, eh?" he asked sharply. "There doesn't seem to be much system in this place——"

Kairns interrupted.

"If the bullet hasn't passed out of Dr. Thorley's sight it is all right, Captain; but we must be certain of that. Dr. Thorley, of course, realizes the importance of that."

The coroner flushed slightly. His small, pompous form stiffened a trifle as he attempted to fix Kairns with an impressive glance.

"You may be certain that I at least know my duty," he said.

"Of course," Kairns agreed, and the threatening storm blew over, though Dr. Thorley remained slightly cool.

"This," he continued, as he fingered the death bullet, "comes within the range of what I consider to be my duty. I can vouch for the manner in which this bullet was recovered. It undoubtedly caused the death of Roger Hamstead. I cannot guarantee anything whatever about the revolver and the other bullets."

"Now we are progressing," Kairns remarked pleasantly, though Captain Mulvaney was still chafing. "Perhaps

you don't mind informing us how the weapon came into your possession."

"Not at all," Dr. Thorley agreed, with a touch of the frost still evident. "I received it from Deacon Jones."

"And I," said Deacon Jones, "took the liberty of performing what I considered to be my duty. I went to the house of Mr. Anderson, the school principal, and recovered it from him. He got it from Miss Perkins, who took it from that Baxter boy."

The last few words came balefully, as though he might be treading upon dangerous ground even to mention the name of Baxter.

"Some person had to think of the things to do." Deacon Jones attempted to launch a barbed shaft. "If Chief Thompson had been alert to his duty, instead of providing a person with false information, there would have been no need for me to uphold the reputation of Burleigh."

It was not entirely clear how the good name of Burleigh had been saved; but it was obvious that two letters had been engraved on the nickel base of the revolver-butt. Cairns examined them, then handed the weapon to Mulvaney, while Deacon Jones glowered his secret enjoyment.

"I am not a man to throw the first stone at my neighbour," said Deacon Jones in mournful tones which did not conceal the relish, "but there isn't any doubt about those initials."

"No?" said Amor Cairns.

"They're *H.M.*" The Deacon's eyes grew brighter. "And *H.M.* in this town stands for Horace Madden."

"Anybody else with the same initials?"

"No, thank the Lord, there isn't."

That came so piously that Captain Mulvaney turned away for a moment.

Dr. Thorley rose, and with his characteristically brisk action announced that he had other duties to perform. There was a suggestion of eagerness in his manner. Deacon Jones rose almost instantly, and the two passed through the door side by side.

Mulvaney watched them with a scowl.

"I'd call it an even race, so far," he said irritably, as he stepped to the window and watched the figures. "Deacon Jones has long legs and it shouldn't be more than a minute before he finds somebody to impress; but Dr. Thorley is using his car, and that gives him an advantage."

Kairns laughed, and Mulvaney turned away from the window with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You surely don't wish to interfere with Burleigh's favourite pastime, Captain," Kairns suggested, and Mulvaney settled down grudgingly to an examination of the revolver and the bullets which Dr. Thorley had left behind him.

"There can't be any doubt of it," said a voice from the doorway; and when Mulvaney swung round he faced an individual who, from his garb, was undoubtedly Nugent, the undertaker.

"Oh, my Lord!" said Mulvaney under his breath, but the figure advanced.

"No doubt of it at all," the undertaker repeated. "Of course, this is not my speciality. You can see that from reading the sign in front of the shop. But I have paid some attention to bullets, and Dr. Thorley undoubtedly is right."

"You were listening?" Mulvaney snapped, but that did not have the slightest effect on Nugent.

"One rarely gets an opportunity to do anything else when Dr. Thorley is around," he returned. "But no. It was my suggestion that we should examine the bullets. If my experience is of any use to you whatever, I am willing to take my oath that the fatal bullet was fired from that weapon."

Mulvaney attempted to scowl, but found the situation quite hopeless.

"But that is not what I came to speak to you about." Nugent remained wholly unperturbed. "It is this."

This was a small bunch of papers which at first glance looked like personal correspondence.

"I took the liberty of removing them from Mr.

Hamstead's coat pocket," Nugent informed. "I felt it was the only way to prevent them falling into Deacon Jones' hands. As a matter of fact, he was nosing round Mr. Hamstead's clothing while Dr. Thorley was finishing the post-mortem—but these had already been removed, and all that was left was a key-ring, a pocket-knife, some small change, and twenty-six dollars in bills. Deacon Jones, I fear, did not derive any great satisfaction from looking them over."

Captain Mulvaney stared. Then he reached for the bunch of papers, but Kairns waved a hand gracefully, and Mulvaney subsided.

"Anything of importance in them, Mr. Nugent?" Kairns asked.

"Only one paper, I would suggest, Mr. Kairns," Nugent replied, as readily as though he had been performing extra duty and had qualified for some special reward. "There is a bill for his first week's board at the Orient Hotel marked 'paid'; and, while it is no affair of mine, I am inclined to feel that Mrs. Baxter took advantage of him. She charged him at the rate of fifty cents a meal, when her regular tariff to country people is only forty cents. But possibly that is not of importance."

"We will look into it," Kairns assured.

"There is a laundry-slip showing that he left some washing at the Chinaman's," Nugent went on. "There is an old theatre programme, and a newspaper clipping which doesn't tell us anything. But *this* does look as though it might be interesting."

Since the later *this* did not permit of ready description, Nugent passed it to Kairns. The latter examined it at length, then handed it to Mulvaney. Nugent seemed to be observing them closely, as though in search of their reactions. Possibly that was not surprising.

For Nugent had handed over a plain envelope, more nearly of the domestic than the business type, whose face was disfigured with a rough inscription of Roger Hamstead's name. It was a disfiguration to the extent that the name

was printed in black ink, in uneven letters which sloped irregularly towards the upper right corner. The first suggestion was that of illiteracy, though at second glance the impression was much less positive. The envelope contained a single sheet of writing-paper—obviously of the domestic type, which had been torn carelessly through the centre—and it, too, was disfigured with letters printed in black ink with the same suggestion of illiteracy which did not last.

These were the printed words :

Spiff,

I got a line on something today—you know what. Come up tonight ; but watch the lights. Make sure this hay-wire bunch has gone to bed. I'll flash the signal from the billiard-room window—you know the one. But go dammed easy. I think the Duke is getting the wind up.

That was all. It was unsigned. Kairns examined the envelope at length.

"Well, Mr. Nugent?" he said.

"Peculiar, is it not, sir?" the undertaker replied modestly.

"In what way, Mr. Nugent?"

"How did the note come into Mr. Hamstead's possession? That was the first thought which occurred to me, Mr. Kairns. You observe, of course, that it did not pass through the post-office. There are only two other methods by which it could have reached Mr. Hamstead. It was handed to him directly, Mr. Kairns, or it was delivered to the Orient Hotel. You will pardon me if I have taken liberties."

"Have you, Mr. Nugent?"

"I don't know, sir ; but I did telephone Mrs. Baxter. . . . Please do not be alarmed, sir, I am not Deacon Jones. I did not reveal the contents of the note. I merely asked Mrs. Baxter if a letter had been left at the hotel yesterday for Mr. Hamstead. You see from the wording that the

letter must have been delivered yesterday, if at all. Mrs. Baxter informs me that no such letter was left at the hotel. I feel I can believe her, Mr. Kairns, for I was one of her supporters when she applied for a beer-licence."

Kairns expressed his appreciation of the methods of Burleigh.

"There are, of course, factions even in a place the size of Burleigh." Nugent coughed slightly. "And I can be quite certain that, under the circumstances, Deacon Jones would not have obtained the information from Mrs. Baxter. In fact, sir, I promised Mrs. Baxter not to pass the information along to him."

"Do you consider that fair, Mr. Nugent?" Kairns asked. "Doesn't it leave the Deacon a trifle handicapped?"

"That may well be, Mr. Kairns, but we must respect the conventions. Mrs. Baxter felt she could trust me, and I must show my appreciation. . . . But that leaves only one point, does it not, Mr. Kairns?"

Kairns nodded.

"By the way, Mr. Nugent," he asked, "did you, by any chance, ever work on a police force?"

Nugent's eyes widened.

"Why, no," he returned. "Such a peculiar question! How did it occur to you, Mr. Kairns?"

"A passing fancy, possibly. But what is the remaining point, Mr. Nugent?"

"That some person must have handed the note to Mr. Hamstead directly. Mrs. Baxter and I discussed the point over the telephone——"

"Any possibility of Mrs. Parsons overhearing?" Kairns asked, and Nugent seemed slightly disturbed.

"It was a risk we were obliged to run," he returned. "But I doubt if it was serious, for Mrs. Parsons was on Mrs. Baxter's side at the time of the beer situation. I think we can trust Mrs. Parsons, though there are so many telephone calls at this time of the day that she could not possibly listen to them all. At any rate, I have spoken to Mrs. Nugent, and she is already working on the point."

"The point?" said Kairns, as though in doubt.

"Why, yes, naturally. Mrs. Nugent is attempting to learn if any person—or rather, what person in Burleigh was used as a messenger to deliver the note directly to Mr. Hamstead. Mrs. Nugent and I have gone into it, after I talked with Mrs. Baxter, and it seemed so peculiar that Mrs. Nugent thought she should work on it at once. It really is peculiar, is it not, Mr. Kairns?"

"In what way, Mr. Nugent?"

"That is plain." Nugent seemed surprised that Kairns had not detected the point. "If the note was delivered to Mr. Hamstead in person—and that appears the only possible way it could have been done—it must have been handed to him outside the Orient Hotel. For if it had happened there, Mrs. Baxter would have known of it. So one of two things happened—either Mr. Hamstead's associate at The Briars used one of the servants to deliver the note, or engaged one of the village people. He certainly did not hand it to Mr. Hamstead personally. There would have been no necessity for that, he would have talked instead."

"Just what police force did you say you worked on, Mr. Nugent?"

The undertaker seemed momentarily surprised.

"Oh, I see, sir; you are pulling my leg."

"Not at all, Mr. Nugent—merely extending my compliments."

"Then most of the compliment belongs to Mrs. Nugent, sir. But as I said, she is already at work. She has telephoned Mary Roper, one of the village girls taken on at The Briars while guests are staying. Mary is a bright young thing, and she is slightly obligated to Mrs. Nugent. You see, she is in Mrs. Nugent's Bible-class at the church, and Mrs. Nugent has helped her on more than one occasion. She will be only too glad to find out if any of The Briars servants delivered the note to Mr. Hamstead."

"You speak highly of her capacity."

"Mary will find out all right, Mr. Kairns." Nugent did not appear to have the slightest doubt. "Servants have a

way of learning things quite simply which others would find difficult. . . .”

“Just as I have been thinking for some minutes, Mr. Nugent.”

Nugent waited politely, as though he might be on the verge of an interesting development.

Then the door opened and the ample figure of a woman showed in the opening. She was pleasant-faced, though slightly eager.

“It’s all right, Jane, come in,” Nugent greeted her. “Mrs. Nugent, gentlemen. Hear anything yet, Jane? Oh, it’s all right. I have just been discussing the matter with Mr. Kairns and the Captain.”

No person in Burleigh, apparently, had the slightest doubt by this time as to which was Amor Kairns and which was Captain Mulvaney, though both were in plain clothes. News was not exactly slow in travelling.

“I was merely going to tell you,” Mrs. Nugent informed her husband, “that Mary Roper is delighted at the opportunity to be of service to me. I called Miss Mamie Fargo, and she is going to help on the other end of it.”

“Umph!” said Kairns, or something of that sort, and both the Nugents gazed at him expectantly.

But Kairns was looking at Mulvaney.

“Do you happen to have the bit of blue voile handy, Captain?” he asked, and the latter hesitated for a moment.

“You know I have,” he returned speculatively. “Oh, I see. . . . A matter of methods. Slightly unusual, isn’t it, Amor? But I follow you . . . possibly most effective.”

“And doubtless a great time-saver. Yes, Captain, I think we will try it.”

Mulvaney again hesitated, then apparently he reached a quick decision, for he pulled the small strip of pale-blue voile from an envelope and handed it to Kairns. The Nugents observed it with obvious relish, though not with understanding.

“Do you mind, Mrs. Nugent, looking at this bit of cloth closely?”

Mrs. Nugent clearly was the obliging sort. Her widening eyes suggested more than casual interest, and her fingers quivered slightly in their eagerness.

"Something to do with the murder?" she asked abruptly.

"Possibly we will not even discuss that phase of the matter at all, Mrs. Nugent," Kairns returned vaguely. "But if the Captain and I were to say we were extremely interested in learning just what garment at—shall we say The Briars?—corresponds to this bit of cloth, would you be willing to devote a trifle of your time to assisting us?"

With the question put in that manner, Mrs. Nugent assumed an air of outward reserve, though the eyes somehow betrayed the inner sentiments.

"Of course she would," Nugent assured.

"Now, Tom," she protested, "you know I am frightfully busy these days. . . . All right, if it will help you gentlemen at all I will do what I can."

"And that," said Kairns, "is the keynote of efficiency."

Mrs. Nugent departed hurriedly.

"Yes," said Tom Nugent, "she'll help." He twisted his head to one side as though listening. Then he jerked his chin suddenly.

It seemed she was already at the telephone.

As Kairns and Mulvaney left the undertaking parlours they glanced at each other uncertainly. Then finally Kairns shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly," he observed, "you will not find that in any ordinary handbook on police methods. But when in Rome, Captain . . . You know the rest of it. But who is this?"

This was Horace Madden, and the ostensible head of The Briars did not appear at all pleased with events.

CHAPTER IX

MADDEN stopped directly in front of them. He looked at them with distaste.

"I've been looking for you," he said. "Where can we go?"

He glanced about, as though impatient with the figures in the doorways and along the street. Mulvaney suggested the car.

"That damned old hypocrite they call Deacon Jones rang me up," Madden said irritably, as soon as they were seated. "Rang me up, I said, and told me if I wanted spiritual guidance I could depend upon him. Spiritual guidance from that? Bah!"

No one answered.

"I said 'Bah'!" Madden repeated, with emphasis.

Still there was no answer.

"All right," he snapped. "Let me see the confounded revolver and I'll soon tell you if it's mine."

Mulvaney produced the weapon. Madden grasped it eagerly, his fingers trembling with anxiety. He looked first at the butt, then he examined the rest of it more leisurely. Finally he handed it back to Mulvaney.

"Yes," he said, with a strange lack of tone in his voice, "it's mine. That dratted old hypocrite was right! Where'd you find it? Oh, I know the story. I mean, exactly where? You might show me the spot."

"No objection whatever," Mulvaney returned, and drove to the fringe of woods along the side road skirting The Briars.

Horace Madden had regained most of his calm, and some tone had returned to his voice.

"Loaded when you got it?" he asked.

Mulvaney informed him that it was.

"Then where'd they get the bullets?"

"They?" Mulvaney returned.

"Yes, damn it all, man! Well, somebody. It wasn't loaded the last time I saw it."

"When was that?"

"Blamed if I know! Weeks ago, months ago, perhaps. I don't remember—had forgotten the damned thing! Kept it in a drawer of the desk in the library; put it there I don't know when . . . so long ago I've forgotten. Forgot that I ever owned such a thing until that blasted old hypocrite—— So that's the spot?"

There was nothing peculiar about the spot where Ted Baxter had made his easy discovery. But Horace Madden attempted to find something out of the ordinary run of events. He failed. Then he considered the pathway running through the woods towards The Briars.

"It's got me," he said doubtfully. "Thanks, I'll walk back to The Briars this way along the path. I might think of something."

He started to hurry away, then paused within a half-dozen paces and looked back.

"Will you be wanting me?" he asked.

Mulvaney shook his head, and Madden continued along his way, walking rapidly and looking at the ground on either side of the pathway as he went.

The Captain and Kairns drove back to the village slowly.

"It's a wonder he didn't ask about the silencer," Mulvaney remarked at length.

"Is it?" Kairns returned. "Naturally, his failure to do so suggests one of two things. He didn't know there was such a thing—or he was too clever to ask about it. But I see we are not without sympathy in our efforts."

Deacon Jones had flagged them from the street. Mulvaney was disposed to overlook the signal, but he changed his mind.

The Deacon thrust his head part way through the open section of the car, at the same time glancing balefully in the direction of the street.

"These meddlesome folks," he said, "can't let a person have a word in peace. But, as I told Madden, if he wants any spiritual guidance—do you think he needs it?"

"Hard to say, Mr. Jones," Mulvaney returned.

"I mean, did he confess?"

"No," the Captain informed, and the Deacon seemed disappointed.

"The sinful," he said, "cling to their sins to the end. But if he needs spiritual guidance, you'll let me know. But he said the revolver was his. I know that."

"Come now, Mr. Jones, isn't that fishing in the dark?"

"No, it isn't," the Deacon almost snapped. "I got it from Mrs. Trevor, the postmaster's wife. She was sorting mail when Madden got in your car . . . and looking out of the window at the time, just by chance. She's good at lip-reading; made a study of it. Slightly deaf, you know. So Madden admitted it was his revolver, but didn't confess?"

Apparently the Deacon felt there would not be an answer, for he withdrew his head and resumed his falcon-eyed journey down the street.

Mrs. Baxter met them at the doorway of the Orient Hotel. They were late for the evening meal, but she assured them she had taken precautions to keep everything "exactly right".

Possibly she had doubts as to her own efficiency, or it may have been merely an outcropping of the instinctive art of the hostess; at any rate, she came to the table after the soup to check up.

"Yes, Mrs. Baxter," Mulvaney complimented, "things so far are exactly all right."

Still, instinct prompted her to linger.

"Possibly," she said at length, "if you were to show me the envelope, I could be more certain if it had been left at the hotel for Mr. Hamstead. We have so few guests, it should not be difficult. He was the only one occupying a room at the time, though of course a few come in each day for meals. You are the only ones occupying rooms now.

I don't see how an envelope could have been left at the hotel for Mr. Hamstead without me knowing about it."

Mulvaney considered the matter briefly, then produced the envelope.

The boldly lettered address seemed to startle Mrs. Baxter.

"What a peculiar thing!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Nugent told me it was strange, but I wasn't prepared for anything like that."

She studied the lettering for some time, then she held the envelope to the light and peered through it.

"There should be a watermark," she explained. "The paper is of good quality, though of course the stationer keeps some good paper. So that wouldn't help us."

Mrs. Baxter sighed, as though disappointed. Then she sat down absent-mindedly in a chair opposite Mulvaney.

"Ted says you are perfect gentlemen," she informed some time later. "I do wish I could help you. And to think . . . poor Mr. Hamstead did not seem at all like—like a dishonest man."

"What makes you suggest that?" Mulvaney asked. "We assumed that he was honest. At least, we have not learned anything to the contrary."

Mrs. Baxter's eyes became speculative.

"It was only something which Mrs. Nugent said to me over the telephone," she replied. "But possibly I misunderstood her. I thought she said there was something in the note which made Mr. Hamstead an—what should I call it?—I think she said an associate of—this is all mixed up, I know—but an associate of the man who murdered him—I mean, the man who lured him up to The Briars. . . . I wonder what they were planning, Mr. Mulvaney. I hadn't heard there was anything in particular at the Briars worth—worth taking. I almost said worth stealing."

There was no answer; and Mrs. Baxter remained reflective, hopeful, while Mulvaney devoted his attention to roast lamb. Mrs. Baxter reached him the mint sauce absent-mindedly. Finally she shook her head.

"No," she declared positively, though it almost appeared that she spoke to some distant object, "that letter was not delivered to the Orient Hotel. It is so unusual I would have heard of it almost instantly. Peculiar, is it not?"

Mrs. Baxter had cleared that point and passed on mentally to some other. Again she was speculative.

"I can think of only one possibility." She measured her words as she reached Kairns the mint sauce for the second time. "In view of the use of the word 'tonight' in the note to Mr. Hamstead——"

"So you have seen it?" Mulvaney interrupted, and Mrs. Baxter seemed surprised.

"Why, no. Mrs. Nugent spoke of that." Then she went on as though there were greater factors to be considered. "Since the person who wrote the note used the word 'tonight', and since Mr. Hamstead was murdered some time last night, the note must have reached Mr. Hamstead some time yesterday. That leaves part of yesterday—and all of today. . . . Yet no person has spoken of being the messenger."

Mrs. Baxter considered that for a moment, then shook her head with conviction.

"No," she declared. "No person in Burleigh was used as the messenger. That is impossible. And it would be ridiculous to think Mr. Hamstead's associate at The Briars could have used any person at The Briars. That would have been equally dangerous. No, I can see only one possibility. They had some secret place for leaving messages for each other—their own private little post-office, you might say."

"Good work," Mulvaney said with sincerity, and Mrs. Baxter suggested a second helping of roast lamb.

Again she was reflective, hopeful.

"Perhaps if I saw the letter," she suggested, "I might detect some trifling little point which you would not understand—I mean, which would be understood only in Burleigh."

Mulvaney searched his pockets, but he failed to find the note.

"Too bad," he said. "I must have dropped it in the car."

Mrs. Baxter murmured something about the waitress, and then departed.

Amor Kairns glanced at Mulvaney. The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you going to let her see the note?" he asked doubtfully.

"Possibly. But doesn't it strike you that she has brought out an extremely important point, perhaps more important than she imagines? She was considering it from the angle of keeping track of the doings in Burleigh, and from the way she puts matters she is probably right . . . any person in Burleigh used as a messenger to deliver such a spectacular envelope must have talked long before this."

Mulvaney agreed, but wondered why that made it so extremely important.

"From this angle, Captain. Suppose—as appears on the surface from that note—Hamstead was a doubtful character working with some person at The Briars, and with some objective which we can only imagine at the moment; and suppose—as Mrs. Baxter suggests—they had the highly logical method of keeping in touch with each other through a private post-office, why would the person at The Briars who sent that note go to the trouble of printing it?"

"Oh!" said Mulvaney, then nodded his approval.

"I fancy Mrs. Baxter has touched a really significant point—and yet it is inconsistent. The fact that the note was printed instead of written suggests an attempt to conceal handwriting. Why would that be necessary between Hamstead and the so-called associate at The Briars? And, if it were merely intended as a precaution against the possibility of the note falling into the wrong hands through accident, why in the name of sanity should

the envelope be addressed openly to Roger Hamstead, with the note in the inside addressed mysteriously to some unknown Spiff?"

Mulvaney did not have an answer. But Mrs. Baxter returned in a less reflective mood than when she departed.

"No," she said positively, "it isn't in the car, Captain."

"The car?" Mulvaney returned. "Oh, I see!"

"Yes, Ted went over the car thoroughly, and the note isn't there."

The Captain had momentary trouble with his coffee.

"Drat it all!" he exclaimed. "How careless of me! Perhaps it slipped down behind the driver's seat. I have known things to happen like that."

"I'll send in hot coffee," Mrs. Baxter declared, with a burst of interest.

The coffee arrived a moment later, and the waitress looked at them with wide-eyed interest. She hovered round for a moment after her duty was performed. Clearly, something was on her mind. Mulvaney encouraged her with a slightly admiring glance.

"Youse gents"—she grasped the opening—"must have a stand-in with Mrs. Baxter." She was looking directly at the coffee stains on the tablecloth. "I never knew that to happen before without her giving the kitchen a piece of her mind."

The waitress departed, though reluctantly, for Mrs. Baxter was again crossing the dining-room.

"No," she assured with conviction, "it isn't there. I helped Ted this time."

Mulvaney tried to look alarmed.

"I'll have to find it," he announced, and once more went through his pockets without results.

"I was wondering," Mrs. Baxter suggested, "if I could see the bit of cloth. I have a very good memory for such things, and I have more opportunities than Mrs. Nugent."

Kairns produced the fragment of pale-blue voile.

Mrs. Baxter accepted it naturally, as though it were her

right. She examined the cloth at leisure, crumpling it in her fingers, then spreading it out again. It was a fairly even fragment, from three-quarters of an inch to an inch in width, and from four to five inches in length.

"Nice material," she said. "Women's wear, of course."

Then she studied it again. This time she took it in her fingers lengthways and pulled. It did not break, though apparently Mrs. Baxter applied some pressure. Eventually she handed it back to Kairns.

"I may want to see it again," she said. "But of course you should keep it in the meantime. A curious thing to be found on the scene of murder."

"Did we say that?" Kairns asked.

"No, you didn't; but that is not material. Why else should you be interested in it?" Mrs. Baxter seemed to be considering the matter as from a distance. "Women's material, and in a billiard-room—though that is natural. I think we should admit that the ladies at The Briars all have good taste. So I doubt if that came from a dress. It would be hardly the thing for any of them. Certainly the shade is much too young for Mrs. Madden or Miss Burn . . . and . . ."

Mrs. Baxter began to count off some invisible objects on the tips of her fingers, slowly and reflectively. "It could be from a scarf, possibly, worn by either Mrs. Madden or Miss Burn. It might be from a dress worn by Miss Spencer, but I doubt it very much. . . . It would clash with her complexion—and she being from Hollywood has studied such matters. No, if it was Miss Spencer it must have been a scarf or merely the trimming of a dress, a flounce—something of that sort. . . . Mrs. Wright, the housekeeper?" Mrs. Baxter shook her head positively. "Hardly," she decided. "Mrs. Wright always seems such a quiet and reserved person. It would be much too bold for her. And the material?"

Mrs. Baxter's eyes brightened as though with a great discovery. "Material?" she said. "Much too good for either Mrs. Wright or Lucy Jupp the housemaid—except

to be worn possibly on some very special occasion. I think that is rather a good point, Mr. Kairns."

"Surprisingly clever," Kairns agreed.

"Thank you, Mr. Kairns. A person who goes out to murder doesn't dress up in her best, particularly if it is after midnight. If it had been either Mrs. Wright or Miss Jupp you would have found a piece of a simple cotton dress and not material of this sort. So that will make it simpler. But what a tug it must have taken to tear that bit from a dress or a scarf."

Kairns conceded the point.

"The material seems almost new," Mrs. Baxter went on. "But not quite. Yet new enough to have taken a really sharp tug. Strange, isn't it, that the fragment should have been left behind at all?"

Kairns did not answer.

"Unless, of course"—Mrs. Baxter seemed to nod at some distant object—"there was great need for haste. I cannot imagine myself tearing a dress or scarf of material as new and firm as that, and not knowing about it at the time. Unless, of course, I was in a state of panic."

Kairns did not offer the least encouragement, and Mulvaney was merely toying with the coffee stain on the tablecloth.

"I think you did the right thing, Mr. Kairns, by coming to me," Mrs. Baxter continued. "I mean, by coming to some woman on a problem like that. I fancy I can be of decided use to you."

Mrs. Baxter had become suddenly eager. She glanced over her shoulder, then hurried away.

"So the little wheels start to grind, eh, Mulvaney?" Kairns observed, as he cocked his head to one side. "You did well, Captain, to come to me with a little problem like that. What remarkable people in Burleigh! And by the way, Mul, had you gained the impression that there was any state of panic in the billiard-room last night?"

"Just the opposite," Mulvaney returned. "I thought it was a cool, cold-blooded, calculated piece of business."

CHAPTER X

THE "Spiff" note found inside the envelope addressed to Roger Hamstead was of interest to more than Mrs. Baxter, though from a slightly different angle. It was, as Kairns observed, too inconsistent to be passed over lightly. After examining it at length he handed it to Mulvaney, and the latter gave it more attention than had been possible at the undertaking establishment.

"Your surface reading, Captain?" Kairns asked.

"If I shut my eyes and took only what I see on the paper, I would say Roger Hamstead was not quite the gentleman he appeared in Mrs. Baxter's dining-room; that he was, in short, 'Spiff', with an associate at The Briars as Mrs. Baxter suggests, and that they planned something. Mrs. Baxter apparently has not been able to imagine what the something could be, though I fancy the same evidence placed in the hands of Mamie Fargo and Aunt Sarah Jane would strike a slightly different key."

Mulvaney talked slowly, turning the paper from side to side and pondering it carefully.

"They, of course, would say the something was Mrs. Madden's jewels," the Captain added. "That information which came via the banker's wife suggests a possible situation. Yet when we read this carefully, it appears there must be a third party at The Briars, whose position, though vague, still suggests some association with Hamstead and . . . and who?"

"With the writer of the note." Kairns reached over and took the paper from Mulvaney's fingers. "The writer asks Hamstead to be careful because the Duke is getting the wind up, as he expresses it. That, naturally, could indicate one of two things. First, that the Duke was an associate and was becoming alarmed, let us say, because of

the danger of the situation; or, second, that the Duke was not an associate and was becoming suspicious of something. But why do you say, Captain, that such would be your reading with your eyes shut?"

"Because of that absolutely idiotic point you brought out some time ago. The note is addressed to 'Spiff' on the inside, and to Roger Hamstead on the envelope. The first suggests secrecy, the second directly the opposite."

Kairns held the paper to the light, then began to tap it slowly against the tips of his fingers.

"In other words, Captain," he said reflectively, "the whole note business has a false ring to it somewhere. Also, as I observed some time ago, why should Spiff's associate at The Briars go to the trouble to print the message? To disguise his handwriting, of course. And yet, after going to that trouble—and you can see it has been some trouble because of the way the printing becomes careless and laboured towards the end—he completely shatters any advantage from his efforts by addressing the envelope plainly to Roger Hamstead. But apart from that, what impression does the note create in your mind, Captain?"

Mulvaney took the paper from Kairns' fingers and went over it again thoroughly.

"Decidedly false," he said, with some conviction. "The use of the word 'Spiff' suggests the low, underworld type of crook. We can be absolutely sure there is no such person at The Briars, and Hamstead's appearance, even in death, lifts him considerably above that level."

"Most decidedly," Kairns agreed. "If the note is not false, and if Hamstead actually was engaged in improper business, it was not of the low, skulking type. But what else, Captain?"

"Nothing else, except that the note is false from first to last," Mulvaney declared. "Everything in it—the coarse printing, the way the paper is torn across the centre carelessly—indicates the crude type of mentality; but I'll be hanged if it is really crude."

"And the one mis-spelled word, 'dammed'?"

"Huh!" said Mulvaney, and for a moment he looked at Cairns in a startled way. "The same thing, I guess," he ended, though apparently that was not what he had intended to say at all.

"Anyway, Fricker and his finger-prints may be able to help us out," Cairns remarked. "If we have run into a low and highly inconsistent mentality at The Briars it must be still there, for there have not been any escapes. And considering the ages of the people at The Briars, would you say, Captain, that the low type of criminal could have reached any of those ages without having been in the hands of the law at some time?"

Mulvaney ticked them off on his fingers.

"It could happen," he said, "but it would be extremely unlikely. Lucy Jupp, the housemaid, is probably around twenty-five; Daisy Spencer is a few years older—and Mrs. Madden, I think, put her down at twenty-eight; then Kingdon is around thirty, or so Mrs. Madden—or, rather, Jessie Burn—said in her memo. No, Amor, the low type of criminal gets into trouble long before that age—before any of those ages. Of course, none of them looks the low type; but you can never be certain of that. They could doll up and play a part for a time. And the rest are all obviously older than Kingdon. But what's on your mind?"

"Merely that Fricker finger-printed the lot a few hours ago, and if there is any criminal at The Briars recently finger-printed, he or she knows instantly that the jig is up if he or she—oh, confound the 'he or she'! Anyway, if there is a criminal at The Briars with a record, that finger-printing must have thrown him into a panic."

Mulvaney nodded with relish.

"Sound, absolutely sound," he declared. "And no criminal of the low type which sticks out all over that note could reach even Lucy Jupp's age without having a record. Did any of them object to having their prints taken?"

Fricker was not immediately available. He was still in his improvised dark-room working with his negatives, and in the meantime Mulvaney searched for Sam Thompson.

"Perhaps we can restore the Chief's dignity," he suggested to Kairns. "Anyway, somebody will have to keep an eye on The Briars to watch for an attempt at a breakaway."

But when they found Chief Thompson in his office he was not apparently suffering in the least from loss of dignity. On the contrary he had an audience, and was making the best of the chance which fate had flung his way. Somebody had obviously pressed his uniform since the afternoon, and his feet no longer occupied the top or any other portion of his desk. There were reasons. One was Mamie Fargo; another was Mrs. Nugent; a third was Wilkes, the garage man councillor; while the faces of the others were not familiar.

"... There can't be any doubt of it, Mamie," the Chief was saying authoritatively, as Kairns and Mulvaney reached the open doorway. "It is just as you say. There was a conspiracy on to rob Mrs. Madden of her jewels, then they lured Hamstead up to The Briars and did him in. I mean..."

The Chief did not finish the point. He paused, as though conscious of huge gaps in the line of reasoning, and then glanced up and grasped eagerly at the opening.

"Come in," he said to Kairns and Mulvaney, much as though he had said, "Thanks for the lifeline."

Their arrival was welcome apparently from more angles than one. For the Chief leaned back importantly, fixed them with a sage air, and observed, "Well, she's found it."

"Indeed," Kairns returned. "Rather quick work, isn't it, Chief?"

"Not so bad," Thompson returned. "Though, of course, she had a certain amount of guidance from headquarters."

Kairns glanced at Mamie Fargo and Mrs. Nugent, and the Chief frowned slightly.

"I mean I made suggestions to her," Thompson explained.

"That is different," Kairns granted. "So who has found what?"

"Oh!" said the Chief; but there were at least three

answers from as many directions which made it plain that Mary Roper had found "the scarf".

"Mary Roper?" Kairns considered. "She is one of the village girls working up at The Briars. But the scarf?"

"Torn," said Mrs. Nugent hurriedly.

"Pale blue," said Wilkes, in almost the same instant.

"That you found in the chair," said Mamie Fargo, in a slightly higher key than the others.

So Kairns' glance came to rest upon Mamie Fargo, and he shook his head slowly.

"There must be some mistake," he suggested. "I did not find any scarf in a chair, Miss Fargo."

"Of course he didn't," Mrs. Nugent declared. "Mary Roper found it in a clothes-closet; and that is just what I said to the Chief, that he should tell Mary to look in all the clothes-closets. And I was sure Mrs. Baxter was right."

"Mrs. Baxter?" said Kairns. "Oh! So she has been up to The Briars?"

"No, she hasn't," Mrs. Nugent returned. "But when she and I talked it over on the 'phone, she said she sort of remembered seeing who was wearing the scarf; and I told Sam Thompson to call Mary Roper and ask her to look in the closet. And there it was, sure enough——"

"With the piece torn out of it," Mamie Fargo added. "Just as you found it."

"But I didn't find——" Kairns began.

"I know," Miss Fargo fairly snapped. "I didn't say you did find a scarf. I'm talking about the bit of cloth you found in the chair in the billiard-room."

"Oh!" said Kairns, as he glanced ominously at Sam Thompson.

The latter returned the glance for a full ten seconds; then he appeared to realize suddenly that there had been a slip somewhere.

"Oh, damn it all!" he exclaimed. "You did that, Mamie."

"Did what?" Miss Fargo demanded. "I didn't do a thing except suggest to Mrs. Nugent that she should suggest

to you that Mrs. Baxter . . . But you needn't curse like that, Mr. Thompson. There are ladies present."

Miss Fargo appealed to Mrs. Nugent with a glance, but the latter did not take the trouble to become haughty.

"I shouldn't have told you." The Chief became slightly sullen. "That was a police secret. Anyway, Mr. Kairns, I didn't mean—I mean, I didn't think—and Mamie fairly pulled it out of me."

Mamie Fargo's eyes glowed with the compliment.

"Haven't we overlooked a rather important point?" Kairns inserted. "You haven't told me who owns the scarf."

"Jessie Burn." There were at least three voices in the chorus, possibly more; but it was difficult to judge numbers under the circumstances.

Kairns whistled in a most gratifying manner.

"So that surprises you?" Mamie Fargo demanded. "Well, it doesn't surprise me."

"Why?" Kairns asked, and for a moment Miss Fargo appeared at a loss for an answer.

"Because nothing does," she said, in the end; but that did not seem to satisfy anybody.

"For my part," said Mrs. Nugent, "I have always thought Miss Burn was a perfect lady. But when Mrs. Baxter called me up and asked if she wasn't right when she thought she recalled seeing Miss Burn wearing a scarf like that piece of cloth which Mr. Kairns showed to us—just to the two of us, wasn't that right, Mr. Kairns?"

Kairns evaded an answer.

"Anyway," Mrs. Nugent went on, with the victory all hers, "when Mrs. Baxter called up, I knew I should forget my feelings towards Miss Burn, and that my duty should be done."

"Quite right." Kairns found his voice. "So, through the process of events, Mary Roper was advised to look in the clothes-closet in Miss Burn's room——"

"To look thoroughly over Miss Burn's room," Mamie Fargo inserted. "She looked in a chest of drawers first, then went to the clothes-closet and found the torn scarf

hanging there, almost in plain sight. There was nothing but a . . . a kimono over it."

"Miss Burn!" Kairns appeared astonished. "And nothing but a kimono over the scarf? No attempt at concealment? Where is the scarf now?"

"Still there. Mary didn't know what to do about that; but she described the torn spot and I know, without even seeing the scarf, that it fits that piece of cloth in your possession, Mr. Kairns."

"But you haven't seen that." Kairns appeared puzzled.

"But I have talked to Mrs. Baxter," Miss Fargo returned, with an air of triumph.

"Oh!" Kairns appeared undecided; then, "Good work," he added. "The Chief, of course, has the authority. I think he should bring us the scarf. And you must have a witness to prove where you found the scarf, if necessary. Where is Edger?"

"Resting," said Mamie Fargo. "His wife says he found it a most trying day. It's the excitement, I suppose."

"I'll rout him out," Sam Thompson declared, with some vigour.

The Chief left hurriedly; and when Kairns and Mulvaney followed, the gathering broke into small fragments.

Miss Fargo called them from the pavement.

"I didn't intend to tell them about Mrs. Madden's jewels"—there was only a half-apology in her tones—"that just slipped out; and they all jumped to the conclusion that it was a conspiracy to rob Mrs. Madden. I didn't really suggest it; and don't you think it rather ridiculous, in a way?"

Mamie Fargo's sharp eyes seemed sparrow-like.

"In what way, Miss Fargo?" Kairns asked.

"Why, the jewels are not up at The Briars at all. Mrs. Carson—the banker's wife, you know—told me this evening that the jewels haven't been at The Briars for weeks—at least, not since any of those guests arrived. And Mr. Hamstead was murdered last night. Strange, isn't it, Mr. Kairns?"

"There are many strange features," Kairns conceded.

Mamie Fargo waited expectantly, but Kairns did not accept the cue.

"If you found anything else in the billiard-room that you don't quite understand," she said, "possibly . . . you know . . ."

Miss Fargo hesitated slightly, as though anxious to help, but fearing to trespass.

"Yes, I know," said Kairns, as he loomed at Mulvaney. "You think, Captain . . . ?"

"They have been most efficient so far," Mulvaney declared. "And as you yourself observed some time ago . . . when in Rome . . ."

"There is a point we don't understand, Miss Fargo," Kairns admitted. "It is about the revolver."

"Yes, I know. It had Mr. Madden's initials, and he has admitted that it is his."

"But you know where it was found?"

"Certainly. Ted Baxter pointed out the spot to Mrs. Baxter and myself after supper. Right out in the open; looked just as though it had fallen from somebody's pocket. But it couldn't have been that, for it was at least ten feet off that pathway leading to The Briars."

Mulvaney had sudden trouble with his cigarette.

"You shouldn't smoke so much," Miss Fargo informed sharply.

"Then, remembering where the revolver was found, Miss Fargo"—Kairns hurried into the situation—"you will be of the greatest possible service to us if you can learn why the silencer was found in a pocket of one of the pool-tables."

"Oh!" said Miss Fargo, then again, "Oh!"

She looked her thanks; and the manner in which she hurried down the street suggested that, at the least, the problem would be attacked from the angle of human interest.

"I hope," Mulvaney grumbled, as he watched the retreating figure, "that my chief back in Ridgeport never hears the inside story of this affair."

CHAPTER XI

FRICKER emerged from his dark-room slightly less enthusiastic than when he approached his task. His nest of finger-prints had not been entirely satisfactory. There were too many blurs; but on the whole he had done "tolerably well", and there were some clear-cut results.

"Before we go into it," Kairns suggested, "did you run into any trouble taking the prints of the people up at The Briars?"

Fricker considered for a moment.

"I can't say there was any real trouble," he decided. "But there was some complaining. You know how people sometimes are—think it is an imposition, and want to know what it is all about."

"No real opposition?"

"No, it didn't go that far."

"Then which ones complained?"

"Well," Fricker recalled, "that Italian chef sort of acted insulted at first, but he came round all right in the end. Then that solemn Mrs. Wright, the housekeeper, looked as though I were accusing her of something; and while she didn't exactly object, she made it plain she considered I was taking liberties. But the only person who really raised a yell was that Dr. Dunmore. The rest took it easy enough—though that fresh young person, Kingdon, I think they call him, told me I had better wire Scotland Yard if I really wanted to get anything on him."

"So when it comes down to the fine point, the only person who acted out of the ordinary was Dr. Dunmore?" Kairns asked.

"Yes." Fricker thought that was about right. "But I wouldn't say even the doc. acted out of the ordinary, for him. I put him down as a peppery cuss who wouldn't be

satisfied unless he had something to complain about. It wasn't that he acted as though he were afraid I would find out anything against him ; it was more that he took it as an imposition from the police—a trespassing on human liberties, I think he called it. I didn't take him seriously. I just took a look at that shock of red whiskers and kidded him along. When you get whiskers like that, Mr. Kairns, almost anything is apt to be inside a man's head. Obstinacy in this case, I would say."

Kairns let it go at that, then he and Mulvaney settled down to examine Fricker's results.

"First," said Fricker, as he consulted his records, "the drinking-glass found on the table opposite the murdered man, half filled with rum, had two of the clearest prints I found anywhere. The first and second fingers of a man's right hand on one side of the glass ; lower down the third finger of the same hand, too blurred to be satisfactory. On the opposite side of the glass was something like a thumb-print, but I couldn't be certain. Wouldn't depend on that at all. Rest of the glass absolutely clean ; looked to me as though it had been wiped, but wouldn't swear to it. Anyway, the prints were in a natural position, just as though some person had picked up the glass for a drink. Prints belong to Dr. Karl Dunmore."

"Huh !" said Mulvaney.

"Yes"—Fricker referred to his records—"the red-headed, bristling-whiskered gent who thought I was trespassing upon human liberties.

"Second, one distinct thumb-print and one fairly clear finger-print on the glass immediately in front of the murdered man. Prints belonged to Roger Hamstead, deceased.

"Third, complete prints of a female left hand on the top of the table where Hamstead was found ; back near the wall, quite close to the ash-tray. Finger-tips spread from a half inch to an inch apart, with only the side of the thumb showing, as though the person had rested the whole hand on the table. Prints belong to Lucy Jupp, housemaid."

Fricker paused and glanced up, but Mulvaney had no observation.

"Phipps informed us," Kairns remarked, "that the housemaid cleaned all the tables in the billiard-room late in the evening. It could be that. Or should her prints have been brushed out by two men sitting at the table?"

"Close to the wall," Fricker said. "I guess that's natural. Fourth, one fairly clear finger-print from a man's left hand, and many blurred prints from the same hand or others—I couldn't say—on a bottle of rum in the buffet. Print belongs to Phipps, the butler."

"There were two bottles of rum," Kairns reminded.

"Yes," Fricker agreed, "I'm coming to that. Phipps' print was on the half-empty bottle. The second bottle looked as though one or two drinks at the most had been taken from it. There were no prints whatever on that bottle. I went over it with a magnifying-glass and couldn't find even a suggestion of a print; so I decided it had been wiped clean by some person after handling. If you want to try it yourself, you will find you can't pick up that bottle without leaving some faint trace behind you. It may not be a clean print, but it will be something. So that bottle was wiped after using.

"Fifth, print of a man's left forefinger and many indistinct prints on a decanter of rye in the buffet. Print belongs to that fresh young chap, Jasper Kingdon.

"Sixth, fairly clear prints of the second and third fingers of a man's left hand and blurred prints of what might be the other fingers on the closed section of the french window. Prints were on the woodwork about five feet from the floor, on the inside of the window; and there were many indistinct prints on the open section of the french window, but I couldn't get a single clear spot from them. Prints on the woodwork belong to that foreign-looking chap, Leander Augustini. And I guess that is about all."

Fricker leaned back, as though expecting a cross-examination. He had faced so many in the course of his duty that it was the next normal step.

"How about the silencer?" Kairns asked.

"Not a thing," Fricker assured him.

"You mean you couldn't get anything?"

"I mean I couldn't get anything because there wasn't anything to get."

"On steel, Fricker; a polished surface. That takes prints readily."

"I can't help it, Mr. Kairns; there wasn't a thing."

"Why, don't you know Phipps almost rebuked Mulvaney for being careless over that silencer?"

"Did he? But I can't help that either."

Kairns looked at Mulvaney.

"Silly, isn't it?" he asked.

The Captain decided that it was, then added, "You mean . . . ?"

"Not even a blur?" Kairns evaded the answer with another question aimed at Fricker.

"Nothing, Mr. Kairns, except the blur I made when I picked it up from the pocket in the pool-table. If you asked me, I'd say it had been wiped clean."

"As I said, Captain, it's silly. Imagine that: a silencer wiped clean, and a revolver bearing the initials *H.M.* left carelessly in the woods where any person might find it."

The Captain got as far as suggesting that it didn't quite fit, except that possibly the weapon had fallen accidentally from one person's pocket, despite Mamie Fargo's wisdom, when a knock sounded at the door.

It was Ted Baxter. The boy's eyes widened at sight of the finger-prints, but he remembered his purpose sufficiently to remark:

"Sam's on the 'phone; wants to speak to Mr. Kairns."

"Sam?" said Kairns.

"Yes, the Chief. He sounds a bit flustered. I guess he can't handle that Miss Burn."

Kairns followed the boy to Mrs. Baxter's sitting-room. The lady was still at the telephone, while Mrs. Nugent, an interested listener, occupied a nearby chair.

" . . . But, Mr. Thompson," Mrs. Baxter was saying,

"I don't see why you can't manage her if you make her understand . . . Thank goodness!"

The last words seemed a tribute to Kairns' arrival. Kairns took the instrument. The Chief was speaking from The Briars, and the Baxters had not misunderstood the situation. Miss Jessie Burn was not exactly obstinate, but she insisted upon seeing Kairns and Mulvaney before parting with the torn scarf. Finally Kairns hung up.

"You'll be going up to The Briars at once?" Mrs. Baxter asked hopefully. "I sometimes wonder if Mr. Thompson has diplomacy."

"I doubt if it is that," Kairns replied. "Probably no person would have done any better under the circumstances."

"I am so glad to hear that," Mrs. Baxter returned regretfully; then she followed Kairns to the doorway.

"Yes," Kairns said at the threshold, "I am going up to The Briars at once."

Mrs. Baxter returned to the telephone, and Kairns paused outside the door long enough to hear her call a number to Mrs. Parsons, who, it appeared, was eternally vigilant at Central.

Fricker asked to accompany Kairns and Mulvaney.

"No one else volunteered," Mulvaney mumbled. "That is strange."

"Possibly they are becoming exhausted," Kairns suggested.

On the way to The Briars, Mulvaney returned to the question of the finger-prints.

"A nice array, at least," he decided. "And there is always one thing you can depend upon: finger-prints never lie."

"No," said Kairns, "not if you read them right."

Mulvaney pondered the answer for some time, then swung to another point.

"That makes too much evidence," he said. "When you consider Sangster's cigarette-stubs, Mrs. Madden's handkerchief, and Miss Burn's scarf, we have nearly everybody at The Briars involved in some way or other."

"Have we?" Kairns asked; and Mulvaney was not entirely pleased with his attitude.

"Anyway, we have the finger-prints of five different people who must have been in the billiard-room . . . not so long ago . . ."

"And that," said Kairns, "is almost as important as the fact that there were no prints where there should have been some . . . on the silencer."

"I'll have to think that over. The traffic in Burleigh is getting me confused."

Fricker laughed. "If we keep on going," he said, "we'll soon see one stray dog."

Phipps, the ever-present, met them at the main doorway. It had undoubtedly been a difficult day for the butler; but not the faintest trace of that showed on the surface.

"I trust, sir," he observed to Kairns, "that while the point may not be of the slightest importance to you, you will see that credit falls where it is due. It was, in reality, sir, Lucy Jupp, the housemaid, who found the torn scarf."

"I understood it was Mary Roper, the village girl," Kairns returned; and though he watched Phipps' face closely, there was no suggestion of a changed countenance.

"When Mary Roper received her telephone call from Mrs. Nugent at the village," Phipps informed, "she lacked the courage to carry out her mission. So she confided in Lucy Jupp, and it was the latter who actually found the scarf. This way, sir."

The "sir" included them all.

Jessie Burn received them with a welcoming smile. She was in the same alcove sitting-room where she had been located through the afternoon; and, as on the earlier occasion, Mrs. Ashley Madden sat opposite her. There were, however, some changes. Miss Burn was less flashily garbed, while a pale-blue scarf of some light material was draped loosely about her shoulders. Mrs. Madden had changed into an evening gown, of extremely conservative fashion, and most of the suggestion of worldliness which

that created was offset by a shawl pulled rather closely about her throat. But the shawl, too, was changed. It was of dark blue, though obviously of fine material.

Perhaps the greatest change of all lay in the fact that Chief Thompson and Edger occupied chairs not far distant. Neither seemed at all comfortable. The Chief's cheeks were slightly flushed, and his poise at the edge of his chair suggested that he was merely waiting for the moment of flight.

"I wouldn't say it was a case of obstructing the course of the law," Thompson began heavily; but Jessie Burn flashed him such a pleasant smile that the sentence was never finished.

Mrs. Madden still filled the role of the matron who has long since lost interest in the trivial events of life.

"It was so obliging of the Chief to come up and see us this evening," Mrs. Madden remarked, with perfect calm. "He intrigued us intensely when he intimated that Jessie's scarf had apparently become involved in your theories of Mr. Hamstead's murder. I hope you don't mind us being curious, Mr. Kairns, but when Mr. Thompson told us that, we felt that we just had to talk it over with you."

"Rather dramatic, isn't it?" Jessie Burn added, as she fingered the pale-blue scarf. "Of course we are greatly interested in learning how Mr. Hamstead came to his death—particularly as it happened here. . . . But womanly curiosity somehow prompts us to talk first about the scarf."

Miss Burn pulled the flimsy fabric from about her shoulders. She spread one end between her hands and showed a ragged gap.

"I used to be very fond of this scarf," she said. "But now look at it! Ruined! Do you mind, Mr. Kairns? Do you happen to have the piece in your pocket?"

Kairns produced the fragment and handed it to Jessie Burn. The latter occupied herself for some time matching the gap with the remnant.

"Yes," she said, "I think it fits. At least, as nearly as

could be expected from this sort of an examination. Do any of you care to look?"

"Possibly," said a voice behind them, "this may be of some assistance."

It was Phipps. He had a huge bread-board, and he held it much as he might have presented a serving of tea.

"I don't know how we would ever get along without Phipps." Jessie Burn's voice sounded really enthusiastic. "That is just the thing we need. . . . Now if you will hold it, Phipps. . . ."

Phipps seemed obliging. He held the bread-board while Jessie Burn spread the torn scarf over the solid surface and matched the fragment of cloth to the ragged spot.

"A perfect fit," she pronounced. "Will you please show it to Mrs. Madden, Phipps?"

Phipps served the scarf with perfect poise, and Mrs. Madden leaned forward with more than passing interest.

"You are quite right, Jessie," she decided. "There cannot be the slightest doubt of it. And to think we might have missed this if the Chief had not been kind enough to call on us this evening!"

Mrs. Madden smiled her thanks at Chief Thompson, but the latter did not seem in complete control of the situation.

"Will you kindly show it to the others, Phipps?" Mrs. Madden asked politely; and Phipps made the rounds, slowly, leaning forward with athletic grace as he paused before each. Then he withdrew with his bread-board, leaving the scarf and the fragment of cloth in Miss Burn's hands.

"It is yours, of course," said Jessie Burn, as she handed both to Captain Mulvaney. "You will doubtless require it as evidence."

"Evidence of what, Miss Burn?" Mulvaney asked politely.

Miss Burn seemed slightly puzzled.

"That is the very point we were discussing with Mr.

Thompson when you arrived," she returned. "The Chief has been very kind. He has explained to us exactly where the fragment of the scarf was found. In the billiard-room, he has informed us, caught in the metal-work of the chair directly across from where Mr. Hamstead's body was found. . . . It is really remarkable how Phipps anticipates one's thoughts."

The sudden digression was due to the fact that Phipps had again arrived. This time he carried a tray of soft drinks.

"Where was I?" Jessie Burn asked, as Phipps served the refreshment. "Oh, I was observing that the Chief informed us that a fragment of my scarf was found in the metal-work of that chair. The Chief is really kind at heart, Mr. Cairns, though I realize that some people might consider him abrupt. I had thought of visiting the billiard-room and testing the scarf and the chair, but Mr. Thompson has informed me that you tried it this afternoon, and the chair had to be spread before the piece of cloth could be recovered."

Phipps retired.

"A prize," said Mrs. Madden, as she glanced at the retreating figure—"a real prize. And to think I found him largely by chance."

"You are, of course, wondering how a piece of my scarf became caught in that chair," Jessie Burn returned to the key point. "So am I."

Though they remained for some time, Jessie Burn did not weaken on that point. She simply could not understand how her scarf had played such a doubtful role. She had not worn it for some days, and, to the best of her belief, it had been hanging innocently on a peg in the closet of her room. And it was ridiculous to think she could have torn it without being fully aware of it at the time.

"Suppose we try to tear it again," she suggested to Mulvaney; and for a time they engaged in a tugging match.

"There!" she said, with a catch of her breath, as the

cloth finally split. "I simply must have another drink. Where is Phipps?"

For once he had not read her thoughts; but it was not long before the situation was corrected.

"Now, Phipps," she said, as the drinks were being served, "I want to know what you think about this."

"Yes, madam. I presume you are referring to the peculiar incident of your blue scarf."

"Indeed I am."

"I fear, madam, that though I have given the matter some thought, I have not formed any opinion which would be of the slightest service."

Phipps was about to escape with solemn dignity; but Jessie Burn had other ideas.

"Then you have some opinion!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "And that is at least being more advanced than the rest of us. Come, Phipps!"

Phipps straightened until his athletic shoulders seemed more athletic still.

"I fear you do Captain Mulvaney and Mr. Kairns an injustice, Miss Burn," he said. "But may I speak, sir?"

That was obviously directed at Kairns.

"Anything you like, Phipps."

"I do not wish to betray any small point I may have observed accidentally," he said slowly, then stopped entirely, with his glance still upon Kairns.

"It is quite all right, Phipps," Kairns assured.

"Then the trifling thought which occurred to me," he returned more briskly, "is that possibly Miss Burn's scarf, or at least a portion of it, was in the billiard-room for the same reason that Mrs. Madden's kerchief was in the buffet."

That left a period of silence, through which Phipps poured another glass of ginger ale for Chief Thompson, then straightened in butleresque pose and retreated as calmly and efficiently as though he had not spoken at all.

"Well, I'll be——" Miss Burn began, as the tip of Phipps' coat-tail disappeared round the corner. "But no, I

won't," she corrected, "for that would be most unladylike. But please, Mr. Kairns."

"Yes," said Mrs. Madden, wholly undisturbed. "Phipps appears to have touched upon a mysterious point."

"Merely that one of your handkerchiefs . . ." Kairns began; then to Mulvaney, "Do you happen to have it with you?"

Mulvaney did. It was in a heavy manilla envelope, and when produced and passed to Mrs. Madden it created a ripple of interest, but not of the scope which had threatened for a moment to engulf Jessie Burn.

Mrs. Madden's examination was complete, and though not actually hurried, it did not suggest loss of time. She paused at the splash of blood on the hem.

"Yes," she pronounced in perfectly clear tones, "it is mine. Where was it found, Mr. Kairns?"

Kairns explained. Jessie Burn and Mrs. Madden exchanged glances.

"The score is even," said Jessie Burn.

"Yes," Mrs. Madden replied. "We are equally stupid. If there is no other point, Mr. Kairns, I would like some time to consider this situation. So would Jessie."

The last words came rather sweetly, and though Miss Burn did not exactly wince, there was a gesture quite unreadable.

So they left Mrs. Madden and Jessie Burn to their thoughts in the flowered alcove. It was a pleasant moonlight night, and some of the silver rays were splashing through the broad windows. They created a rather charming picture when one glanced from the moonlight rays to the simplicity of Mrs. Madden's costume, with her dark-blue shawl and the old-fashioned part of her slightly silvering hair.

Kairns was still thinking of the almost childlike innocence of the setting when Phipps met them at the foot of the stairway, and with butler-like efficiency began to escort them to the main doorway. Phipps paused half-way, and coughed slightly.

"If it would not be intruding, sir . . ." he began, with his glance part-way between Mulvaney and Kairns.

"How could it be intruding, Phipps?" Kairns returned vaguely.

"Thank you; that is very kind of you, sir. But the passing thought merely occurred to me that there might be some significance in the fact that Mrs. Madden's kerchief was apparently used to protect some person's hand while opening the new bottle of rum, and yet at the same time it is stained with blood."

Kairns did not answer, but he looked at Phipps quite firmly.

"I realize that I express myself quite badly, sir," he continued, "but possibly the thought is difficult to explain. One gains the impression that some person sat opposite Mr. Hamstead, drinking rum, that Mr. Hamstead was shot and that the glass of rum was not finished. One also gains the impression that the kerchief was used to assist in opening the bottle, yet that must have been after Mr. Hamstead was shot, since the kerchief is marked with blood. It is confusing, is it not, sir?"

Phipps did not wait for an answer. Instead, he resumed his official duty of escorting them to the doorway.

Mulvaney scowled at the back of Phipps' uniform, as though confessing that he should have thought of the point himself. Possibly he might have had some reply; but they reached the doorway within a half-dozen paces, and when they passed through, Phipps followed them to the spacious verandah. There he paused and glanced cautiously up and down its full length.

"You will pardon me again, sir, if I seem meddlesome," he said, and through the dusk it was difficult to judge at whom the "sir" was aimed.

"As if we could do anything else!" Kairns replied.

"It is very good of you, sir," Phipps assured, with the proper tone of appreciation in his voice. "You have been extremely patient with me, so I thought you would prob-

ably be interested in knowing that Miss Daisy Spencer is making progress."

"Progress?" said Kairns, with outward surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Kairns. I was referring to her psychic memory."

"Oh!" said Kairns. "And just what has she remembered now, Phipps?"

"I would not express it in just those words, Mr. Kairns," Phipps' voice suggested the faintest tinge of rebuke. "For there is a distinct difference between memory and the functioning of the psychic—or so I have been informed. I mean, Lucy Jupp's hearing is quite acute, sir, and she overheard Miss Spencer stating there was a distinct difference between the two."

"Thank you, Phipps; I stand corrected. So, in what manner has Miss Spencer's psychic system functioned?"

"She has said that, through concentration, her psychic self has been able to detect that it was a man who passed through the doorway last night. She believes that in time, Mr. Kairns, her psychic functioning will permit her to follow the figure . . ."

"You were about to add 'to the billiard-room'?"

"Possibly; but, so far as I am aware, Miss Spencer has not actually used those words. I believed you would be interested, Mr. Kairns."

"Vastly so, Phipps"; and then for a time there was a silence which no one seemed willing to break.

Finally Phipps coughed gently, as though to suggest that the move was not his.

"You were about to observe, Phipps, I fancy, that Miss Daisy Spencer is not particularly gifted with discretion," Kairns suggested, and almost instantly he regretted that the lighting effect on the verandah was so inadequate, for some expression touched Phipps' countenance. Probably it was the first suggestion of departure from the butler-like face which Kairns had witnessed. Yet it was gone too swiftly to be definitely catalogued.

"You have a peculiar faculty of penetration, Mr.

Kairns," Phipps returned. "It had occurred to me, merely in passing, that if I chanced to possess such a dangerous gift as Miss Spencer's I would be extremely careful, under the circumstances, where I made it known."

"Meaning, of course, that there are times when it is most unwise to remember too much?"

"To remember? But pardon me, Mr. Kairns."

Phipps, the butler, turned and walked away, and his athletic shoulders were at the correct angle as he passed through the doorway of The Briars. The spur to his departure obviously was a figure coming up the driveway. It was Horace Madden. At first he was inclined to ignore them, then he paused suddenly.

"I have just been down to the village," he said, with some spirit, "and I have heard those damned clacking women."

"Slightly redundant, are you not, Mr. Madden?" Kairns asked. "I mean merely in your adjectives."

"Oh, all right! What if I am? But why in the devil didn't you tell me about it instead of telling those cackling cats?"

"Tell you? About what?"

"The silencer to the revolver, of course. What else am I interested in just now?"

"I don't know," Kairns returned, "except we have just heard that Daisy Spencer's psychic memory has functioned to the extent of informing her that it was a man who passed through the doorway last night."

"Well, what of it?" Madden stared sharply. "Did she describe the man?"

"Not yet; but apparently she believes her psychic memory will permit that in time."

"Psychic memory! Fiddlesticks! Another cackling cat—I mean hen. . . . Anyway, Miss Spencer is a damned ass!"

"How do you spell damned, Mr. Madden?"

"How do I spell it? Of all the silly questions! What are you driving at? D—a—m—n—e—d, if you like it

that way, and you can emphasize every letter so far as that Spencer woman goes."

"What were you going to say about the silencer, Mr. Madden?" Kairns digressed.

"Nothing, except that I never had one. Now who the blazes do you suppose would be carrying a silencer around this place? Neck of the woods, that's what I call it, with a lot of cackling hens."

Horace Madden was obviously smarting under the situation; for without waiting for a reply, he turned and passed through the doorway where Phipps stood at polite attention.

The door closed quietly.

"Heard every word of it, didn't he?" Mulvaney grumbled.

CHAPTER XII

DEACON JONES, long, lean, and hungry-eyed, was waiting for them in front of Wilkes' garage.

"Did you get it?" he demanded of Kairns, simply because the latter was the first to leave the car.

Kairns appeared puzzled, so Deacon Jones took him confidently by the arm and began to lead him up the street. There were watchers, and that somehow seemed to bring a touch of elation to the Deacon's voice.

"I mean, did you get Miss Burn's scarf?" he added. "But I suppose you did; for I wouldn't expect Sam Thompson to handle a woman like that."

"Yes, we got it," Kairns informed; "but the Chief did very well."

"Yes, I know," the Deacon's sharp chin jerked. "That woman merely wanted to know if the torn piece matched."

Kairns seemed astonished.

"You haven't had a chance yet to talk to anybody since we got back," he observed.

"It's just knowing women," the Deacon explained. "That's the first thing any woman would want to know. But did the piece match?"

"The piece?" Kairns attempted to appear puzzled, but it was not effective.

"Yes," the Deacon nodded with relish. "I know about that. The wife, that's Mrs. Jones, isn't such bad friends with Mrs. Nugent; and Mrs. Nugent called on Mamie Fargo while you were at The Briars, and Mamie 'phoned Mrs. Thompson. She guessed that Sam must have talked at the supper-table; and she was right. So we know about the piece of scarf found in the murderer's chair. But did it match?"

Kairns considered Burleigh's councillor for some time.

Others, apparently, were doing the same, though from a greater distance.

"Yes," he conceded. "Even Miss Burn was satisfied that it matched."

"I thought it would." The Deacon's sharp chin jerked again. "That's because Mary Roper came down to the village while you were at The Briars. Mary's a bright young thing; gets it from her mother's side of the house—but that doesn't matter. Mary keeps her eyes open; and that's the reason she said she saw somebody in Miss Burn's room yesterday afternoon . . . long before the murder."

Deacon Jones apparently knew when he had a scoring point. It showed in his eyes, his chin, and possibly in his stride; but Kairns could not judge the latter.

"Please," said Kairns, and that seemed sufficiently gratifying.

"It was that woman, Daisy Spencer, the movie actress"; the Deacon sort of spat out the last words as though they were an offence.

"Ho!" said Kairns.

"I thought you would," Jones was highly pleased. "And that adds to my difficulty of deciding who murdered Hamstead. I thought I had it this afternoon when I first heard Hamstead had been seen at night, round by the fair grounds, with that butler person. . . ."

"So you heard that?"

The Deacon's shoulders stiffened, as though he had been reminded of one of the least pleasant phases of existence.

"It is not for me to cast the first stone at my neighbour," he replied. "So I am not saying anything whatever about what took Herbie Austin and Suzy Smith to that place at that time of night, but I will say it was a good place to meet if you didn't want to be seen. I'm talking now about Hamstead and that butler person. I thought I knew then that it was that butler who killed Hamstead after luring him up to The Briars; but things have happened since. I've just heard about Daisy Spencer; and, Mr. Kairns,

while I don't want to cast . . . I mean there's evil in the hearts of women who make an unholy show of themselves. But I'm not saying a thing about that Spencer woman. For I've been talking to Madden, and I don't like the way he acts. And that reminds me. Did you find any finger-prints on the silencer of the revolver?"

"Finger-prints?" said Kairns queerly.

"Yes, finger-prints." The Deacon again enjoyed a moment of elation. "Everybody knows that Fricker is a finger-print expert. Besides, Ted Baxter saw some of the prints when he went to the door that time to give you the telephone message. You remember? Well, Ted told his mother, and that woman couldn't keep a thing to herself. You'll find that out soon enough, Mr. Kairns, if you stay long in Burleigh. Mamie Fargo heard it, and she telephoned Mrs. Jones."

"Oh!" said Kairns meekly.

"Yes"; the Deacon seemed momentarily morose. "Women have a way of finding out things . . . in Burleigh. But you haven't told me about the silencer."

"No," Kairns replied, "I haven't. And it occurs to me, Mr. Jones, that you can be of positive help. But first of all, what do you think of Madden?"

"He's the sort who would do it, quick as a flash. He's ungodly, given to the ways of the world, and that has made his heart hard. So you found his finger-prints on the silencer?"

The Deacon seemed about to break away, as though he had found a choice morsel whose flavour would not be perfect until he had shared it with others.

"A moment," Kairns halted the movement. "Fact of the matter is, Mr. Jones, that you have put your finger on the very point where you can help us. There were no prints whatever on the silencer. So there you have a really tough problem to work on. First, Madden's revolver is found—in the woods, it may be true—but close to a pathway where people would be passing every day, and where it could be readily seen. You see that point . . . an

apparent attempt to get rid of the weapon, but such a weak attempt that in reality it looks like a move to reveal it. On the other hand, the silencer was left where it could not be missed, for long, but it was very carefully protected by having all finger-prints removed. Now that, Mr. Jones, should keep you occupied for some time."

The Deacon's hungry eyes had grown bright with eagerness.

"I'll work on it," he promised; "that, and Daisy Spencer sneaking into Miss Burn's room."

"Sneaking?" Kairns questioned.

"That's what Mary Roper says, and she has keen eyes; but I'll find out something. They can't keep everything from me, all the time."

"There is another point where you may help," Kairns suggested, and, if possible, the Deacon's eyes grew brighter still.

"It is this: Fricker finger-printed everybody up at The Briars this afternoon——"

"Yes, I know," the Deacon interrupted. "Mary Roper heard that from Lucy Jupp, the housemaid, and that Dr.—what's his name?—Dunmore, isn't it? Anyway, he made quite a fuss about it."

"The point," Kairns interrupted patiently, "is that if there is really a criminal of long standing at The Briars, he has been finger-printed, and he must know instantly that his prints will betray him from his record. So we rather expect, Deacon, that some time through the night some person at The Briars will make an attempt at a getaway. That may be a critical matter."

"I'll handle that," the Deacon decided instantly. "I'll call a meeting of the council this minute. We'll . . . we'll . . ."

Deacon Jones did not finish the sentence, for apparently the spur to action was too great. He turned, and with the triumphant carriage of the crusader he marched back to Wilkes' garage.

A half-hour later he announced that a brigade of ten

villagers had been engaged to picket The Briars through the night.

"We'll nab them, or him," the Deacon announced convincingly; and as Kairns and Mulvaney walked back to the Orient Hotel the latter remarked that, though Burleigh's methods had not yet been written into regular police codes, they might still be effective.

"Besides," he added, "I am beginning to catch the spirit of the thing."

"Or, in other words," Kairns suggested, "you are conceding the point that the best workman is the one who can get the other fellow to do his job for him, and do it efficiently."

CHAPTER XIII

IN the morning, Deacon Jones caught them at the breakfast-table. His face was mournful, and his voice was more mournful still; while he seemed haggard and worn, as though he had formed part of the all-night vigilance committee.

"You're wrong," he said gloomily, as he dropped into an empty chair next to Fricker. "There wasn't a thing happened through the night. Nobody tried to escape."

He said the last few words balefully, and he began to pick at Mrs. Baxter's tablecloth.

Kairns seemed to be waiting patiently, while Mulvaney began a sentence but did not finish it.

"Not a thing," Jones repeated, "except Phipps, the butler. And that wasn't much; nothing, I expect. But we hoped at first . . . I mean, we thought at first he was trying to get away. But all he did was come down to the village and post a letter."

Deacon Jones returned to his picking at the unoffending cloth.

"Yes," said Kairns slowly, "so Mrs. Baxter has informed us."

He regretted that the moment the Deacon glanced up. For it seemed like a touch of cruelty.

"I might have known it"; the Deacon's voice was like a flame held under moderate control. "I expect it's that Jud Samson. A cousin of hers, on the guard last night. I did know; for I fought to have him kept off, but Wilkes voted against me on that. So he told!"

Deacon Jones rose wearily, as though the house of Baxter imposed burdens too great for his spiritual restraint.

"I'll see to that," he said; then he left.

Mulvaney and Kairns devoted some time to the late

night editions of the Ridgeport newspapers. They had evidently changed their minds, both as to the quantity and the quality of the publicity which should be given to Mrs. Ashley Madden. For, having satisfied themselves that there actually was a murder and a mystery, they played it with a blare of trumpets which Mrs. Madden had never known before, even during her most palmy days. The *Post* was, as Mulvaney expressed it, a shriek of insanity. It had not only spread every last detail and touch of imagination with which it could surround the Hamstead murder, but it had dashed into the past and provided a fairly accurate account of Mrs. Madden's early exploits. There was even a list of her ex-husbands, with brief accounts as to the career of each.

"You might call it a special edition of the Hamstead murder," Kairns observed, as he pushed the *Post* aside; "and they seem to have interviewed Deacon Jones over the telephone. That should cheer him up."

Mrs. Baxter passed through the doorway leading to the kitchen. She was carrying a tray of breakfast cakes.

"Everything all right, gentlemen?" she asked. Then without waiting for an answer, she went on: "These cakes are my speciality. I always do them myself. Have some, Captain; I can recommend them."

The Captain obliged. For it was obvious that Mrs. Baxter had not become worn and haggard like Deacon Jones. On the contrary, she was looking even more brisk than on the previous evening. The atmosphere appeared to agree with her.

"That was a really clever suggestion of yours, Mr. Kairns." She sat down as soon as the cakes were served. "I should have thought of it myself. For if Phipps posted a letter through the night, we might be interested in knowing who received it. That *could* account for him not attempting to escape through the night, don't you think, Mr. Kairns?"

"Possibly," Kairns agreed. "Any luck at the post-office?"

"Quite decidedly, and good luck at that. But just to keep you from becoming conceited, I must say the real credit goes to Mamie Fargo."

"Indeed!" Kairns seemed pleased, rather than the opposite.

"You are a queer one, Mr. Kairns," Mrs. Baxter recognized that point. "Anyway, when I got to the post-office the bags were just being sealed, and Mr. Trevor couldn't possibly have reopened them. But he had a telephone call from Mamie a half hour earlier. Mamie seems to have heard quite early about Phipps posting the letter, and really, Mr. Kairns, I feel at times that she is quite gifted. So she telephoned, and of course Mr. Trevor was obliging. He always is. Phipps' letter was addressed to . . . I have it here . . . yes . . . to a Mr. Theodore Massey in Ridgeport."

Kairns nodded his approval, and Mrs. Baxter seemed to become a trifle more youthful.

"Mr. Trevor might be mistaken," he hinted; but Mrs. Baxter shook her head convincingly.

"I have the utmost confidence in Mr. Trevor," she assured him. "He knows the handwriting of every person in Burleigh, and there aren't any strangers here now except you three gentlemen and the folks up at The Briars. So of course Mr. Trevor had no trouble whatever in locating the letter."

"That seems logical," Kairns granted.

"But it is peculiar—most peculiar. I mean one phase of it is strange." Mrs. Baxter twisted her head to one side. "Naturally I haven't said anything to anybody about this, but Mr. Trevor *is* observing—at times almost too observing. So when he gave me the address of Phipps' letter he handed me this letter and remarked that it was addressed in the same handwriting."

"Indeed?" Kairns repeated, though in slightly different tones.

"Yes," said Mrs. Baxter, as she presented an envelope. "The letter is addressed to you."

"Oh!" said Kairns, slightly astonished, as he took the letter from Mrs. Baxter and began to examine it in a puzzled way.

"So Phipps has written to me? Yes, Phipps has written to me. Interesting handwriting, don't you think, Mrs. Baxter?"

"Should I get you a knife?" Mrs. Baxter returned, as she reached for a spare on the buffet. "This is entirely clean."

"Interesting handwriting," Kairns had become so absent-minded that he did not seem to notice the knife which Mrs. Baxter offered. "There is much we can learn from handwriting, Mrs. Baxter. But unfortunately I am not an expert. And, Captain, surely you haven't lost that printed message found in Hamstead's pocket?"

Amor Kairns shook his head, as though distressed.

Mrs. Baxter apparently recognized that for more than its surface value, for she did not wait for Mulvaney to reply.

"It might contain a confession," she suggested.

"Handwriting," said Kairns, "is so revealing. It is in reality a confession of character, though it requires much skill and effort to detect the meaning of the confession. . . ."

"How silly of me!" said Mrs. Baxter. "It is, of course, your letter; but if it should contain anything concerning Burleigh which puzzles you, I am certain I could be of assistance."

Mrs. Baxter smiled hopefully, hesitated a moment, then departed with some of the cakes which Mulvaney had hoped to consume.

"And therein," said Mulvaney ruefully, "lies the road to starvation."

Kairns discussed handwriting at length, for he caught a side glimpse of a hopeful figure still peering at them through an extremely narrow slit in the kitchen doorway. So he placed the letter in his pocket absent-mindedly and finally made his escape.

He opened the letter only after they had walked a full

block and turned an adjoining corner. The reading of the enclosed message required only an extremely brief space of time; and as Kairns handed the enclosure to Mulvaney his eyes seemed somewhat confused.

This is what Captain Mulvaney read:

Why don't you come up and ask me something?
Benito.

"Benito?" said Mulvaney in a voice which matched Kairns' eyes. "The Italian chef, of course. I had forgotten all about him. But hang it all, Amor, I thought the Deacon said it was Phipps who posted the letters last night?"

"So it was, but possibly Trevor has been mistaken. Suppose we drop around and see him?"

Trevor, the post-master, was a small, round man with a bald head, and with eyes which apparently had grown accustomed to peering. For he peered at them through his wicket, then opened his private door instantly and welcomed them inside.

Kairns had the letter in his hand, and after a few brief preliminaries which made it evident that Trevor could hold his own in Burleigh, he explained the situation.

Trevor examined the envelope at length, then handed it back to Kairns.

"Of course," he said, "I trust I will never be asked to step into the witness-box and take my oath on the point, but even if that should be necessary, I feel I could do my full duty. There can be no doubt about it, Mr. Kairns. Mrs. Baxter has informed you accurately. The handwriting is the same. But I couldn't say it was Phipps'."

The little round man evidently enjoyed the momentary distinction which had come his way, and he seemed pleased when Kairns did not grasp the opportunity to interrupt.

"A person in my position," he informed, "must become a specialist. Now, Mrs. Trevor's speciality is lip-reading. That has been forced upon her by circumstances. Mrs. Baxter's speciality is a peculiarly succulent form of break-

fast cake. Doubtless you have already had an opportunity of tasting them. My speciality is handwriting. I feel that I know the writing of every person in Burleigh. In another two weeks I would know the writing of every person recently arrived at The Briars, and of yourselves, no doubt, sirs."

Trevor bowed. It seemed a peak moment in his career. Kairns thanked him profusely and departed.

"And that," he observed a moment later, "leaves a gap somewhere. The most obvious thing, of course, is that Benito wrote both letters, and that Phipps merely became obliging and offered to post them for him."

"It's just as Maw says, isn't it?" a voice asked at Kairns' right elbow. It was Ted Baxter, and the boy apparently was profiting from early training.

"Exactly," said Kairns, and the boy departed reluctantly.

"In other words," Mulvaney remarked, as he studied Kairns' countenance, "we are going to learn the deaf-and-dumb language. But if we whisper in the meantime I guess we'll be safe."

They took a trip to The Briars, and the spacious lawns appeared unusually attractive in the early morning sunshine. But there was an almost complete lack of visible action. The only person in sight was Daisy Spencer, and she surprised them by appearing from behind a cluster of cedar.

The girl's eyes were wide, in Hollywood fashion, and though that did not suggest that she was entirely natural, it did at least indicate interest.

"You poor things," she greeted them, with emphasis upon each word, "out so early in the morning! But I have been around an hour. That is one thing we learn in the pictures: Early to bed and early to rise makes a person . . . but perhaps you've heard it before, Mr. Kairns?"

"I doubt if I have," Kairns returned.

". . . Makes a person sleepy, grouchy, and wise," Miss Spencer rounded out the sentence, then laughed artificially.

"So you have been concentrating?" Kairns accused.

"You poor thing; how did you know that?" Miss Spencer countered. "But what if I have?"

"I would make a good father-confessor," Kairns returned. "Remembered anything more?"

"Oh, Mr. Kairns, how could you? Now is that nice?"

"We are at least trying to be nice."

"Now isn't that too sweet for words! A handsome man, but so helpless. He has to be reminded that the psychic mind does not remember; it merely senses something from the past."

"Pardon my stupidity, Miss Spencer." Kairns bowed slightly. "I am so unaccustomed to the psychic mind. Then should I put it this way: Has the psychic mind sensed anything from the past? The morning air should be helpful."

"You are so discerning. But pardon me; a moment ago I found you helpless; but it is a woman's right to . . . Yes, the psychic mind has recalled quite distinctly that it was a man who passed through the doorway; it has seen plainly that it was the billiard-room doorway, and that the man was wearing a sports coat. But the poor thing! The psychic mind failed just there, though I know it will sense more quite soon. I have the feeling."

Daisy Spencer's eyes were wide and babylike, though they did not suggest the same innocence.

"I see," Kairns returned. "You progress step by step up the hillway of revelation. May I ask if the next step will be to sense the precise shade of the sports coat?"

"Now, Mr. Kairns, how could you?" Then she nodded suddenly. "I think that will be it."

Kairns studied her for some time, for so long that the babylike eyes lost some of their firmness.

"You will pardon me, Miss Spencer," he said, "if I elaborate a point upon which I touched yesterday; but have you given due consideration to the nature of the ground you tread?"

Daisy Spencer seemed to find that a relief.

"Grass," she replied, "nice green grass, freshly cut yesterday forenoon; or was it the day before?"

"I mean," Kairns pressed the point, "that it might be wise if you told us now all you know."

"Oh, Mr. Kairns!" the tone was a rebuke. "The psychic mind——"

"Suppose we forget the psychic mind for a moment and apply ordinary reasoning," Kairns interrupted. "For if we do that, we must recognize that your course is most ill-advised. I would even say that it could be positively dangerous."

Miss Spencer hesitated for a moment through which it appeared she was about to cast aside her mask. But it was for an instant only, for when she spoke she had swung back to her role.

"You poor thing," she said in a puzzled way. "I have told you all I know; but when I sense more—— Ah!" That came with obvious relief as she glimpsed a figure crossing the lawn, but not in their direction. "Dr. Dunmore," she went on. I must tell the doctor about the way the psychic mind is functioning. He does not always believe; so you'll excuse me, you poor old dear."

Daisy Spencer did not wait for an answer. Instead, she started on the trail of Dr. Dunmore, and as yet the latter had not detected the imminent visitation.

"He's wearing a sports coat," Fricker suggested. "But I expect she knew the colour of it long ago."

Phipps met them at the main doorway; though apparently he had been caught slightly off his guard, for it required one pressure of the finger on the electric button. He was in morning uniform, and that meant pale-blue braid instead of the flashy magenta of the afternoon; but apart from that it did not seem there was the slightest change in Phipps' exterior.

Mulvaney explained that they were looking for Benito, and Phipps bowed slightly and left them in the reception-room, precisely as though it were the most natural thing in the world for them to be looking for the chef. He was back in a few minutes.

"Benito will be with you almost directly," he reported,

"though the hour is slightly inconvenient. The breakfast hour at The Briars is so irregular, you understand."

Phipps remained just inside the doorway. Then he coughed slightly and glanced at Amor Kairns.

"I fear you will regard me as most impertinent," he suggested.

"Quite out of the question, Phipps. What is it?"

"You are extremely kind, sir; but this time I am so forward as to wish to ask a question or two. If I intrude..."

Kairns gestured for him to proceed.

"It is merely that I would like to know if this gentleman, Mr. Fricker, I believe, located any of my finger-prints in the billiard-room. It is a curious question, I realize."

"Not at all," Kairns returned after brief consideration. "Do you recall what you found, Fricker? It is quite all right to tell Phipps."

Fricker consulted a notebook.

"A couple of prints from the left hand on the half-empty rum-bottle in the buffet," he reported.

"The left hand," Phipps considered. "That is quite natural. I always raise the bottle with the left hand and hold the glass or serving-tray with the right. And now, if I may be so bold, may I ask if there were any prints on the second rum-bottle, more recently opened?"

Fricker waited for his instructions.

"There is, of course, method in the background, eh, Phipps?" Kairns asked. "Suppose you tell us if there were any prints on that bottle."

Phipps' expression did not change in the slightest, and if he hesitated, it was for an extremely brief space of time.

"If the theory which I am forming is accurate," he replied, "and of course, sir, there may be errors, I would suggest that there could not be any prints on that particular bottle."

"Right," said Kairns.

"Thank you, sir," said Phipps, as he glanced at the doorway. "This is Benito."

Phipps bowed and left them with the Italian chef.

Benito was excessively stout. He had a florid face and shrewd, speculative eyes. It was not difficult to understand that one of his particular build might have asked the butler to perform the small service of delivering his letters to the post-office. His glance ran slowly over his three visitors, and his eyes, narrowed somewhat, seemed lost in his jolly face.

"You wished to see us?" Kairns suggested.

"Huh? What? Me wish to see you?"

Benito evidently was Italian in name only.

Kairns was at a loss for a moment.

"Possibly you do not recognize us," he said.

"Yes, you're from the police. The butler told me that; but what's that to do with it?"

Again Kairns hesitated.

"You mean we should have brought Chief Thompson?"

"Chief Thompson? Why?"

"This is peculiar, Benito. We understood you suggested we should call on you . . . that you might tell us something about the death of Mr. Hamstead. But, to arrive more quickly at the point, you sent me this note?"

Kairns produced the envelope and handed it to the chef. The latter read the address, hesitated, then, at a gesture from Kairns, he read the contents.

"Ugh!" he said, so sharply that it seemed like a revelation. "You got that, when?"

"This morning, in the mail. It was posted at the village last evening."

"Ugh!" Benito repeated, though with less concern. "Well, I didn't write it."

"No?" said Kairns, with some surprise; and for a time they faced each other. Benito evidently arrived at some swift decision.

"No," he replied, "I didn't. But why don't you ask me something?"

"Curious," Kairns reflected. "But since you didn't write this note, Benito, there are so many questions we might ask you that I fear we would waste much time, and they say this is an important hour of your day. So, what

would you tell us, Benito, if we were lucky enough to hit on the right question at first?"

"Good, eh? You're good. But I didn't write that note . . ." He hesitated again briefly. "And I expect Mrs. Wright will spoil the toast, or something. . . . All right, seeing you've asked me the right question, I'll have to tell you I was on the lawn three nights before the murder—after midnight—and I saw him there."

"Roger Hamstead?"

"Yes. You don't think I pried into somebody else's affairs?"

"What if you did, Benito? Somebody has to do that. And of course you knew Hamstead had no right there at that time of night?"

"I didn't think anything of the sort," Benito corrected, "seeing he was with Mr. Madden."

"Oh!" said Kairns, with some emphasis. "I will remain silent, Benito. You have a way of your own."

"Maybe I have." Benito's pin-like eyes seemed to brighten. "They're hiring me, but it isn't hard to get jobs these days, not for a good—I mean, I never had trouble landing something. I was standing by a bunch of cedar, smoking, when they went past. They didn't see me; and I heard just a few words. Mr. Madden seemed angry . . . and he was calling the other man Frank."

Benito stopped as though that told his whole story.

"Frank?" Kairns pressed. "You are certain, Benito? For you know Hamstead's name is Roger?"

"I know." Benito's sharp eyes grew sharper still. "If I didn't know that, would I have anything to tell you? And don't go saying I didn't know Roger Hamstead when I saw him. There's a beer parlour in the village, and I like beer; so did Hamstead. I knew him at sight. It was Hamstead; and Mr. Madden didn't like something. He was saying: 'Frank, you'll have get out of here and stay out.' That's all I know; it's all I heard. Not another word. I expect that woman is burning the toast, or something. . . ."

Benito turned ponderously towards the door.

"You didn't hear Hamstead?" Kairns began.

"No, I didn't. Not another word, except they were walking away from the house. . . . No, I didn't follow . . . it wasn't any of my business; I didn't know the man was going to be murdered. . . . No, I didn't ever see him on the grounds at any other time. . . . I expect that woman . . ."

Benito reached the doorway at that point. He passed through; and Kairns, Mulvaney, and Fricker remained staring at each other.

Phipps appeared in the doorway. His pose suggested that he had merely paused on his way to the main exit. In the lack of any better idea they accepted the unspoken suggestion.

Phipps accompanied them one pace beyond the main doorway. Then he coughed slightly and looked at Mulvaney.

"I brought you one of Mr. Sangster's cigarettes," he said. "I took it directly from his private supply, though I trust that is no offence."

The butler extended the lone cigarette to Mulvaney. The latter took it.

"Why?" he asked.

"I felt you would probably like to have it analysed to see if it is the same texture as the stubs in the ash-tray," he replied politely. "The letter S is not entirely uncommon. A delightful morning, is it not, sir?"

Mulvaney mumbled that it was, and Phipps retreated with butler-like dignity and closed the door upon them.

CHAPTER XIV

TUBBY SANGSTER was on the driveway, some thirty yards distant. He was ostensibly pondering Mulvaney's car with more than passing interest ; but since the car was far from new, there did not seem to be any point to Sangster's tactics. It was more natural to assume that he was waiting for their return.

At closer range, Sangster seemed a wholly careless and indifferent individual. His face was as smiling and good-natured as the morning, though people with a slightly rotund figure often have the knack of taking that particular view of life.

"Quite a race, eh, Mr. Kairns?—quite a race," he greeted.

Kairns became puzzled.

"But the poor doc never had a chance," Sangster continued ; and Kairns' face became still more puzzled.

"I mean the Spencer woman entered in the Doc Dunmore handicap," Sangster informed pleasantly ; and he appeared to find much enjoyment from passing events. "The doc took to the open, across country, and that was fatal. His only chance, as I could have told him, was to stick to the underbrush."

The words brought a smile to Kairns' lips.

"So Daisy Spencer caught him?" he returned. "I am not in the least surprised. She seemed to be gaining, the last we saw of them."

"Sure thing. She picked him up down by the tennis courts ; caught him on the first lap around that cluster of cedar . . . and told him all about the sports coat."

Tubby Sangster was not wearing a sports coat. There was nothing in his physical make-up to suggest that he ever had, or would.

"Thank goodness, I don't go in for that sort of thing." Sangster was smiling quite pleasantly. He seemed to wear rather well even in the sunlight, and he was evidently fully aware of the fact that any person at The Briars who did "go in for that sort of thing" was placed at a distinct disadvantage.

"No?" Kairns returned, with a non-committal smile. "But wouldn't it be easy to borrow one?"

Sangster shrugged his rather heavy shoulders.

"Damned silly woman!" He turned the subject slightly. "Don't you think so, Mr. Kairns?"

"In what way, Mr. Sangster?"

"Oh, I imagine you know. Anyway, I don't think I would be silly enough to go around acting that way, even if I were a woman; but I suppose it's the Hollywood influence."

"I thought she seemed rather clever," Kairns suggested, and Sangster was obviously surprised.

"Well, I suppose a person could look at it that way," he considered, with a slight delay; then he brightened perceptibly. "But you know how it is, Kairns . . . clever in one spot and a complete blank somewhere else. But as I say, it is a dumb bit of work."

Tubby Sangster appeared unwilling to depart, though clearly aware of the fact that there was no outward reason why he should delay. Kairns followed Fricker and Mulvaney into the car, and Sangster approached and thrust his head part-way through the window.

He smiled rather broadly, almost boyishly.

"I suppose I may as well out with it," he said. "I hear you have been scoring fair luck so far. Got anything on me?"

There did not seem to be any real concern in the question, though there was evidently more than passing interest.

Kairns considered the point and arrived at a swift decision.

"It is a queer question, Mr. Sangster," he returned. "But you seem such a pleasant chap that I don't mind

answering it. By the way, Sangster, you don't seem quite to fit in here, do you?"

"Don't I?" said Sangster, as though surprised. "I thought I could fit in anywhere. But you were going to tell me something."

"Yes, we have something on you, Sangster." Kairns measured the effect. "Devilish serious, if we choose to look at it in that way. Fact of the matter is, under certain circumstances, it would be enough to . . ."

Kairns did not finish the sentence, for it appeared more effective to leave it that way. But, though clearly interested, Sangster did not seem greatly concerned by the blank at the end.

"A bit dramatic, eh, Kairns?" he replied. "But it hasn't bowled me over. So . . .?"

"We don't mind in the least, Sangster. Fact of the matter is we found evidence—remember I use the word 'evidence'—that you were sitting at that table in the billiard-room, just across from Hamstead, and were enjoying a quiet little drink with him shortly before he was shot."

"The hell you did?"

That came with a flash; and the pleasant morning sunshine fell from Sangster's face like a mask. Then he pondered Kairns' face, swung over to a study of Mulvaney, and finally he permitted the sunshine to steal back slowly to his countenance.

"Oh, you're joshing!" he said, somewhat doubtfully.

"Not in the slightest. And having gone this far, Sangster, I think I should tell you the rest. You should be a devilish sight more careful with those initialled cigarettes."

"Cigarettes?" Sangster's face appeared to flash into a blank; then a swift flush of anger mottled his cheeks.

It was clearly evident that there were two Tubby Sangsters—the one the pleasant-faced individual with the ample figure who looked upon life through rose-tinted glasses; and the other this individual who was staring now

at Amor Kairns with a touch of brutality mottling his round cheeks.

"The hell you say !" He covered part of his old ground, and the voice likewise suggested that there were two Tubby Sangsters. "Just what do you mean?"

"Nothing very positive, Mr. Sangster," Kairns' voice was in striking contrast, for it was now as pleasant as the sunshiny morning, "except that the stubs of two of your cigarettes were found in the ash-tray at the table where Hamstead was . . ."—the pause suggested the unpleasantness of Kairns' duty—"was murdered."

"Hell !" said Tubby Sangster, with a sort of intimate familiarity ; and queerly enough he continued to stare at Amor Kairns with an intensity of purpose which was slightly baffling.

Sangster stared for a prolonged period. It was difficult to measure the time, though possibly the seconds dragged into a minute or more. But the emotions which ran over Tubby Sangster's round countenance were so varied and fascinating that no one felt the slightest inclination to interrupt. The emotions started with Tubby Sangster number two—the brutal and possibly violent ; and they traced a slow and fluctuating course through the stream of life back to Tubby Sangster number one—the careless and pleasant-faced individual who found existence mostly an indifferent toy. Sangster obviously had difficulty in harnessing the emotions at that particular spot, but in the end he succeeded.

"Oh, I see," he added eventually. "Thanks, Kairns, for tipping me off. I'm frightfully obliged ; but I must be running along. The breakfast bell must have rung long ago."

Sangster left them, with a slightly airy wave of the hand, as though the gesture aided him in anchoring his emotions to Tubby Sangster number one.

Mulvaney drove away without speaking. He was clearly impressed. So was Kairns ; and obviously it was not Fricker's place to say a word.

They were half-way to the village when Cairns finally broke the silence.

"I wonder, Mul," he said, with a trace of penitence in his voice, "if I didn't make a huge mistake that time."

"Just what I have been asking myself," Mulvaney returned, though without accusation.

CHAPTER XV

MISS MAMIE FARGO apparently had a habit of stopping cars by standing in the centre of the roadway. At any rate, it was effective, and when Mulvaney brought the car to a grinding stop she smiled pleasantly and stepped to the open window. Miss Fargo, though obviously ageing, had acquired a tint to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes which suggested that it is not youth alone which drinks of the wine of existence.

"I know you will excuse me, Mr. Kairns," she greeted the party in general. "But Aunt Sarah Jane and I have been talking matters over and we thought it so peculiar that . . . well, here I am, taking liberties again."

Miss Fargo caught Fricker's glance and laughed easily.

"So peculiar," she repeated, "though of course I presume it is merely that Aunt Sarah Jane and I have overlooked something."

"It is decidedly peculiar." Kairns felt his way into the unknown. "But were you referring to any definite phase of the situation, Miss Fargo?"

"Naturally we took the precaution to telephone Mrs. Parsons first, and when she told us you hadn't telephoned a single message to any of the nearby towns to stop Mr. Kingdon, we just thought . . . You know, it is peculiar. But since you haven't been over to Royalston—that's the nearest telegraph wire, you know—and Mrs. Parsons says you haven't used the long distance this morning . . . it is peculiar. But Mrs. Parsons must be wrong. She sometimes is; but not often. Of course, Mr. Kairns—"

"To stop Kingdon?" Kairns said, with a tinge of doubt.

"Oh!" Mamie Fargo returned, with the bright lights leaping in her eyes. "Surely you don't mean to say you don't know?"

"I fear we must make a terrible confession, Miss Fargo. Just what is it that we don't know?"

"Oh, Mr. Kairns, I knew there had been a slip somewhere! Aunt Sarah Jane and I felt it in our bones, as they say." Mamie Fargo seemed fully aware of a victory, and she paused for a moment to enjoy it. "Why, Mr. Kingdon drove away from The Briars quite early this morning, alone; and we thought . . . But Mrs. Parsons said you hadn't put in a single telephone call to trace him."

Miss Fargo twisted her head to one side. She had doubtless scored many a victory through the years; but that did not appear to detract from the enjoyment of this.

"Please tell us more," Kairns begged. "How did you detect the point?"

"Well, of course, in the most natural way possible. I am not saying a word against Deacon Jones, Mr. Kairns, but when he undertakes to guard a place through the night, he makes it most obvious. So I said to myself last night, the moment I saw the way Mr. Jones was placing his guards, that there simply couldn't be any attempt to escape until after the guards were taken away. For I really think, Mr. Kairns, that we have a very clever criminal at The Briars. Don't you think so too?"

Kairns agreed readily.

"More than unusually clever," Mamie Fargo insisted, "though naturally I am not experienced in judging such matters; but I have read of cases. So I said to myself last night that I might as well get a good sleep, and then perhaps if I wakened in the morning after the guards were taken away and glanced from the window from time to time . . . just by chance, you understand, Mr. Kairns?"

"And you saw Jasper Kingdon driving away from The Briars?"

"Indeed I did, not long after daylight, when the guards went home. He was alone, and I thought he looked rather anxious. I know he seemed to be peering from side to side as he drove; and he was making exceptionally

good time as he passed here. So Aunt Sarah Jane and I thought——”

“Naturally. How long ago would that be?”

“At least two hours, perhaps a trifle more.”

“Humph!” said Mulvaney. “Well, if you’ll excuse us . . .”

The Captain’s meaning was plain, but Mamie Fargo did not leave the open window. The moment was hers, and she was not resigning without a struggle.

“An exceptionally clever criminal,” she said, “at The Briars. And I think that affair of the revolver and the silencer proves it.”

She nodded sagely and her grey hair bobbed in the breeze.

“Of course Aunt Sarah Jane and I didn’t see eye to eye on that point at first,” she informed. “We seldom do agree at once; but after discussion you realize the difficult points smooth out.”

Miss Fargo paused for so long that it was obvious she was insisting upon prompting.

“So that point has smoothed out?” Kairns asked.

“Reasonably so,” she assured him. “Aunt Sarah Jane and I both feel now that it proves we have a most unusually clever criminal at The Briars. If the revolver had been a little more difficult to find, or if there had been fingerprints on the silencer, even smudged ones——”

“So you know that?” Kairns interposed; and Mamie Fargo favoured him with another sage glance.

“Possibly I should warn you, Mr. Kairns,” she suggested, “though I do not wish to say a single word against Deacon Jones. But if there is any little matter which you do not wish to be generally known, I would advise that you should not . . . You understand?”

“I think I do,” Kairns granted.

“And that proves how clever our criminal is.” Miss Fargo hurried back to her major point. “You understand? A revolver easily found, and a silencer left almost in plain sight, but carefully cleaned. . . . Things are not always

what they seem, Mr. Kairns. But there is Aunt Sarah Jane at the window. She must have heard something."

Mamie Fargo departed as hurriedly as her years would permit; and Captain Mulvaney made a queer sound in his throat as he resumed his brief journey to the village.

"How will we handle it?" Mulvaney asked abruptly, a block farther on. "There is no use wasting time driving over to Royalston; but long-distance calls here will be as private as though we stood in the centre of the main street and shouted. I suppose if Kingdon has two hours' jump on us we'll have to work fast. He could be beyond Ridgeport by this time, fifty miles on his way to New York, or——"

"Yes, of course, Mulvaney, that 'or' is important," Kairns remarked, and they drove the rest of the distance in silence.

As they stopped in front of Wilkes' garage a car was standing there. It was a roadster, dust-blown, and somehow its general appearance suggested recent hard usage. The door was open, the seat was unoccupied, and a newspaper dangled half-way over the running-board. Kairns glanced at it instinctively.

Then a figure emerged from the garage. It was Jasper Kingdon, and as he recognized them at first glance he waved an airy greeting.

Kingdon stepped into the roadster, found the newspaper an encumbrance, kicked it into the street, then drove leisurely in the direction of The Briars. But there was a clear-cut tension in his manner, as though he were still suffering from furious driving.

"Well," said Mulvaney doubtfully, "I'll be blowed! I must admit I didn't expect the gent to return. But just the same, I'd like to know where he has been."

"Then suppose, Mal, you use your eyes," Kairns suggested. "For that is a copy of the *Ridgeport Post* that he kicked from the car impatiently, was it not? And no wonder, after the speed he must have made. He must have travelled from sixty to seventy miles an hour most

of the way ; for if you have a look, Mul, you will see it is a copy of this morning's edition of the *Post*. And he couldn't have found that much short of Ridgeport at this time of the morning. Interesting, is it not ? But why the speed ? And why such a frantic journey at all ?”

“I don't know,” Mulvaney returned uncertainly. “But it does take a slice off Mamie Fargo's smile, and that is something.”

CHAPTER XVI

THERE was apparently, as Cairns suggested, some curious human alignment at The Briars.

"Doubtless," he added, "quite in keeping with the fantasy which has been the background of Mrs. Madden's career. Perhaps the strangest feature of all which we have discovered to date is the abnormal interweaving of activities. Phipps evidently was in regular contact with Hamstead, for one secret meeting at the fair grounds suggests that there must have been more. Yet Horace Madden also knew Roger Hamstead, and knew him as Frank. That implies equally close contact at some time or other, though recent relations were so seriously strained that Madden ordered him from The Briars grounds and told him to keep away. And yet, still more curious is the method employed by Phipps to inform us that Madden knew Hamstead as Frank. And that reminds me that we really haven't made any progress in learning Hamstead's real identity."

There was an obvious approach which, though not overlooked, had been neglected up to the present, and that was Hamstead's personal possessions at the Orient Hotel.

"Strange," Cairns observed, after suggesting an examination of Hamstead's room. "And yet it may be less strange than it appears on the surface. I wonder, Captain, if we are not overlooking the fact that Mrs. Madden would be a natural attraction for adventurous people? Adventurers and opportunists. They must be that, Captain, all of them, calculating opportunists with a flair for adventure in their make-up, waiting like hawks for whatever chance might present to them."

But it was eventually decided that the examination of

Hamstead's quarters and possessions at the Orient could wait. A matter of more immediate import was Fricker's finger-prints.

"Would you say, Mul," Kairns asked, "that there was any real significance in the fact that no person attempted to make a breakaway from The Briars last night?"

"Certainly," Mulvaney replied instantly. "I have been twisting that point over in my mind for some time, and I think I have the answer. The murderer knows as well as we do that we have a complete record of his finger-prints; and he knows, as well, that we will not lose much time in checking them at the Bureau of Investigation at Washington. But I think you put your finger on the spot a moment ago when you said they were all adventurers. The murderer certainly is that, and he has a touch of the gambling spirit. He knows quite well that unless we have an abnormal break of luck, we can't turn a bunch of loose prints in at the Bureau and have them identified in a wink of the eye. If we're lucky, we may get them in a couple of days; it might take longer. So he is gambling on that. And if, by any chance, he knows his prints are not there, all he has to do is sit tight."

"I fancy so," Kairns agreed, "so the quicker we get Fricker on his way, the better."

Fricker left shortly in his own car, with a threefold duty before him. There was the checking of the finger-prints from 'The Briars' party; there was the Sangster cigarette and the stubs to be analysed; and there was the Theodore Massey address to be checked in the hope of learning Phipps' connections in Ridgeport. Fricker agreed to telephone or run back to Burleigh with the results as soon as any were available. Then Kairns and Mulvaney turned their attention to Hamstead's possessions at the Orient.

Mrs. Baxter evidently had not been entirely unaware of passing events, for she met them at the office counter, and her manner advertised eagerness for action.

"Oh, Mr. Kairns!" she exclaimed; and that was quite safe in view of the lack of other guests. "I have just had

a telephone call from Mamie Fargo, and she is so sorry. She gave you the wrong information by a half hour. You know, about the time when Mr. Kingdon drove away from The Briars this morning. Mamie looked at the wrong clock; one is a half hour fast. So Mr. Kingdon was gone a half hour longer than you thought—if that makes any difference.”

The last words were leading, and Mrs. Baxter twisted her head to one side like a child waiting to be rewarded for some good deed. But Kairns did not volunteer any information.

“It is peculiar, is it not?” Mrs. Baxter felt her way hopefully. “Just as Mamie says . . . Peculiar, indeed. He must have driven at tremendous speed, don’t you think?”

“That would depend entirely on where he went,” Kairns returned, as though the point were not material.

“Oh!” said Mrs. Baxter; then: “Now, Mr. Kairns, it must have been tremendous speed if he drove to Ridgeport and back in that time. For he must have gone for a purpose, and that must have taken at least a few minutes in the city. Mr. Wilkes thinks . . .”

“Yes,” Kairns encouraged.

“You are really very clever, Mr. Kairns, but you shouldn’t have left that newspaper on the pavement in front of the garage. Mr. Wilkes wonders how it could possibly have got there if Mr. Kingdon did not drive to Ridgeport.”

Kairns decided to laugh; though that was mostly to offset the effect of Mulvaney’s scowl. Mrs. Baxter also laughed.

“We do have such a difficult time feeling our way through this mysterious affair,” she said. “But I thought, the moment Mamie Fargo mentioned it over the ’phone, that I knew why Mr. Kingdon made such a desperate trip to Ridgeport. For I think we may call it desperate, may we not, Mr. Kairns?”

“Possibly,” he agreed.

“Why, of course we may,” Mrs. Baxter became more

confident. "Any person who drives to Ridgeport and back in that time, and stops even for a few minutes for some mysterious purpose, is desperate. It must have been something extremely important which took him there. Mamie and I have agreed on that point; and I think—but I haven't discussed this with Mamie—that he drove furiously because he didn't want people at The Briars to know he had been away. You see, he was back in time for breakfast."

"Yes?" Kairns questioned.

"Of course he was, Mr. Kairns. I mentioned the point to Mrs. Nugent, and she called through to Mary Roper—you know, the village girl up at The Briars—and Mary said they were just straggling in to breakfast one or two at a time and that the meal wasn't over yet. So perhaps no person at The Briars would know Mr. Kingdon had been away; or they might think he was just out for a short drive."

Kairns' look suggested admiration.

"Thank you, Mr. Kairns," Mrs. Baxter added hastily. "So I think Mr. Kingdon is more afraid of some person at The Briars than he is of . . . of the police."

Mrs. Baxter might have followed up her victory, except that the telephone rang and that situation was too promising to permit of delay. But after two or three minutes of conversation it appeared that disappointment was her lot.

"It was Mrs. Parsons," she informed, as Kairns and Mulvaney had not departed. "She thought, you know, that being on the switchboard, she might pick up some information by talking with girls up the line to Ridgeport. But they hadn't heard a thing, I mean about a fast driver passing through. They are not very observing at some of those small villages."

Mrs. Baxter provided the key to Hamstead's quarters, then she left them, still slightly irritated at the switchboard girls up the line.

But her spirit of helpfulness was almost as strong as the mother instinct, for Mulvaney had barely closed the

door to Hamstead's room when there was a knock on its dull and uninteresting panel.

"There really isn't a thing in Mr. Hamstead's belongings to let a person know anything about him," she informed, as Mulvaney responded to the knock. "I thought, you know, that I might save you some time, so I looked over his things this morning."

"Thank you so much," said Mulvaney, with slight emphasis on the "so". "Then I suppose, Amor, we might as well give it up?"

"I guess so," Kairns begrudged. "But it won't hurt us to sit here and smoke a cigarette."

Mrs. Baxter departed, fully conscious that she had done her duty, and Mulvaney closed the door and placed a chair against it.

"Well, that's something," he declared. "If we do find anything, Amor, we will at least know we have it for ourselves."

"Which," Kairns smiled, "you appear to consider an advantage."

They began their examination of Hamstead's few possessions. He had been apparently a man of simple tastes, or he had at least disciplined himself to that role. For, as they had been informed earlier, there was only one hand-bag, in addition to a top-coat hanging in the gloomy closet. The hand-bag, though reasonably spacious, had not been filled to capacity, for except for a few changes of linen and small garments, most of which had been placed in the bureau drawer, there were few effects. Toilet articles on the bureau were not betraying. They were of staple variety which might have been purchased almost anywhere; and though Kairns examined the linen in detail, he failed to make any interesting discoveries.

"About all his linen tells us," Kairns decided, "is that he either played his part well, or was a man without fancy tastes. Not even an initial anywhere. I wonder about the top-coat?"

That, too, lacked tokens of betrayal. It was of the semi-

ready type which might have been purchased at any one of a score of clothing shops, and though Kairns looked hopefully in the pockets, there were none of those name-labels which so often crop up in unexpected places. Eventually he put it aside and admitted it was not helpful. Finally he found a discarded handkerchief in a side pocket of the hand-bag and it bore a laundry initial. But the letter was *H*.

Kairns put it aside with some signs of disappointment.

Apart from such small personal possessions, the only articles in the hand-bag were a bus time-table and a book of express money orders.

"No use," Kairns remarked at length. "The money orders, naturally, are made out in the name of Roger Hamstead. It would be ridiculous to expect anything else, since he must have counted upon cashing some in Burleigh. And that means there is nothing to be gained by attempting to trace the issue house. They, too, would know him only as Roger Hamstead. Well, Mul, have you been using your eyes?"

The Captain had been examining a hair-brush with only a vague element of hope in the background.

"Yes," he put the brush aside, "but they haven't told me a thing. The money orders were apparently issued in Ridgeport, but that doesn't help much."

"No," Kairns agreed absently; then some feature of the hand-bag appeared to interest him.

"An old hand-bag," he observed. "The style suggests that it is at least ten years old; and the frayed leather doesn't contradict that in the slightest. I wouldn't say Hamstead was exactly a slovenly sort of person, Captain, but at the same time he was far from fastidious. And yet, look at that name-tag."

Mulvaney obliged.

"Well," he returned, with a trace of impatience. "That, too, gives us the name Roger Hamstead, but nothing else. Unless it means something to you to know it is printed."

"Printed, but not embossed," Kairns considered. "And

that also is quite in line with the part Hamstead was playing. For I think we are forced to admit, Captain, that the man actually was playing a role in Burleigh. But suppose he was after Mrs. Madden's jewels? No, that doesn't fit; or does it, Captain?"

Mulvaney shook his head sharply.

"Not to me," he declared. "Horace Madden knew him as Frank."

"So he did," Kairns agreed. "And Phipps knew him as . . . what? If it had been merely a case of Phipps and Hamstead, it could have been a matter of Mrs. Madden's jewels as well." Kairns shook his head suddenly. "No," he decided, "that would be ridiculous . . . *before* the jewels were stolen. If Hamstead had been killed after the jewels were taken—and we have no knowledge that any person ever intended to steal them—it might fit. But to commit a murder at The Briars while the jewels were still in the bank vault? Ridiculous, Captain, assuming there was any such plot; for that would assuredly guarantee that the jewels would remain in the vault. . . . And yet that name-tag, though it bears the name of Roger Hamstead, is somehow inconsistent with the bag. Is it not, Captain?"

If so, Mulvaney failed to detect the point.

"I mean," Kairns suggested, "that while the bag is clearly worn and scuffed, and while the leather folder which contains the name-card is also old and frayed, the actual name-card looks quite fresh. That, Mul, somehow gives me a vague hope that Hamstead may merely have slipped in a new name-card over the old. You know, he didn't expect to be murdered, and accordingly wouldn't look for any person to push into his affairs that far."

"Gosh!" said Mulvaney eagerly, as he grasped the tag and worked at it swiftly.

Then: "Whoops, my dear Amor! Good shooting."

The Captain displayed an old name-card, as weathered as the hand-bag in general. "That's something," he added, as he passed it to Kairns. "But who is the gent?"

"The gentleman," Kairns replied, "according to his

own confession, is Frank Ashley. A Frank Ashley, without an address, of course. But how interesting! And Horace Madden knew him as Frank . . . and . . . Oh, my Lord!"

Amor Kairns leaned back in his straight-backed chair and eyed Mulvaney curiously.

"Well?" Mulvaney demanded. "Don't look at me that way! Oh, hell!"

"Precisely," Kairns agreed. "I see you have the point. Frank Ashley; and Mrs. Ashley Madden. Suppose you look at that edition of the *Ridgeport Post* in your pocket and check up on the ex-husbands. . . . Yes, you have the point, Captain. A peculiar weakness of Mrs. Madden, was it not, to retain part of the ex-husband's name? What number was Frank Ashley on the list?"

"Husband number four," Mulvaney reported a moment later; "and Horace Madden is husband number five. Well, I'll be——"

Instead of finishing the sentence, Mulvaney stared for a time at Amor Kairns.

CHAPTER XVII

KAIRNS studied in detail the *Ridgeport Post's* article on Mrs. Madden's ex-husbands. Then he handed the paper to Mulvaney, and while the latter likewise pondered the ex-evangelist's matrimonial exploits, Kairns seemed to be struggling with his memory. Finally Mulvaney put the paper aside and glanced at Kairns inquiringly.

"That article does not appear to tell us much," Kairns observed, "other than to hint that when the woman cast aside Frank Ashley she did not leave him in good financial circumstances. I have some memory of the incident, Captain, and it seems to me there was talk at the time that Ashley would have contested the divorce proceedings if he had not been so short of funds. Ashley, of course, must have had some slight mental defect or he would never have married a woman of that sort. So what picture has been presented to us, Captain?"

"Can't say," Mulvaney returned hastily, "except to be certain that it helps to round out the general setting of adventurers. Men who marry sensational divorcées of that sort can scarcely be termed ideal citizens; and without wishing to say a word against the dead, I feel, Amor, that there must have been a strain of depravity in them somewhere. They are sensation-seekers; you know the type, pretend to be temperamental, but, to put it in plain words, they lack mental balance. So you see what I am driving at . . . Roger Hamstead, alias Frank Ashley, being of that general sort, might not have been above swinging some sort of club over somebody at The Briars."

Kairns nodded with interest.

"Meaning . . .?" he asked; and Mulvaney shrugged his shoulders.

"The prodigal ex-husband trying to nose his way back to the flesh-pots," he suggested.

"*Via* Phipps, the butler?" Kairns asked. "What a pretty scene is outlined before us, Captain. Horace Madden evidently knew Frank Ashley of old, and according to Benito, the chef, they walked together in The Briars grounds and Madden ordered him off the place and told him to stay off. Yet we would not have learned that, except for the subtlety of Phipps. Where do you find Phipps sitting in on that picture, Captain?"

The latter flicked for a time at the burned-out stub of a cigarette.

"Phipps," he decided, "undoubtedly sent you that note and signed it 'Benito'. He knew that Benito had information which he, Phipps, wanted to fall into your hands; so that is the method he took to guarantee that end. So Benito must have told him about the Madden-Ashley conversation; or in other words, Phipps must have known that Roger Hamstead was Frank Ashley, and for some reason best known to himself he wanted you to know that as well."

"Rather well done," Kairns complimented. "That is precisely what I was thinking. But it does not give us even a reasonable idea whether or not there is any direct connection between Phipps and Benito. That sort of information might easily be gossiped about among servants without there being any definite hook-up between the two. Yet one point does seem clear, Captain: the arrival of Phipps at The Briars some weeks ago may not be entirely the lucky find which Mrs. Madden considers it."

"And I'll throw in Lucy Jupp," Mulvaney added hastily. Kairns agreed.

"Something seems to be shaping, Captain," he returned reflectively, "but for the life of me I cannot see more than the vague outlines. Phipps and Lucy Jupp arrive at The Briars a few weeks apart, and under strikingly similar conditions. The former butler resigned and recommended Phipps; the former housemaid resigned and recommended

Lucy Jupp. I think, Mulvaney, we have heard of incidents of that sort before this."

"We have," Mulvaney granted readily. "Planted at The Briars, both of them. But by whom?"

"That is a rather essential point," Kairns considered. "It could have been by Ashley, alias Hamstead."

"And it could have been by Horace Madden," Mulvaney declared.

"Or even by Mrs. Madden," Kairns suggested. "The woman, we must remember, is capable of almost any extreme when it comes to seeking publicity. She informed us that she regarded Phipps' arrival as an extremely fortunate event; which may be nothing more than a thin shield. Or was it Jessie Burn who planted Phipps and Lucy Jupp at The Briars? That woman, Captain, apparently has the brains. I think, if we could arrive at all the details of the past, we would discover that it was Miss Burn who suggested Mrs. Madden's most successful exploits. And now, of course, it could be possible that Mrs. Madden was again burning for the limelight. Curious, is it not, how one of our great national pastimes consists of worship at the shrine of notoriety? And that reminds me of two things: we have a series of abnormal characters before us—opportunists, sensation-seekers, possibly vultures, or they could not be content to live in the Madden type of atmosphere where sanity has never been particularly evident; and secondly, we have not paid enough attention to the actual purpose back of the gathering at The Briars."

Mulvaney probed his memory for a time.

"Phipps again," he said. "If I recall rightly, Phipps informed us that Lucy Jupp possessed an acute sense of hearing, and because of that she learned something was contemplated with regard to Honduras. And Leander Augustini comes from Honduras."

"And Jasper Kingdon, who spends much of his time gambling with Augustini, made a frantic trip to Ridgeport before breakfast, and, as Mrs. Baxter so cleverly deduced, the frantic feature of the journey may have been due to

the fact that he wanted to conceal his trip from the household at The Briars rather than from us. It's a tangle, Captain, I must admit; and yet my mind keeps travelling back to Phipps. He has such an ingenious way of imparting his information. An expedition of some sort, I believe he said, is planned to Honduras, and the people at The Briars represent the members of the party. They are attempting to learn if their temperaments rasp. So, Mulvaney, I fancy we should look into that expedition more carefully."

There were, however, other factors which called for consideration. It was reasonably clear that Mrs. Madden could not have been unaware of the identity of Frank Ashley.

"No suggestion of disguise on the man's face," Kairns recalled. "Or did you detect anything, Captain?"

"Nothing," Mulvaney returned readily. "Smooth-shaven; possibly a moustache may have come off since he did duty as Mrs. Madden's fourth husband; but there doesn't seem to have been the slightest attempt to conceal his identity, other than the adoption of another name."

"And yet," Kairns reflected, "isn't it strange, Captain, the almost complete lack of papers in his possession? Nothing whatever in his pockets . . . except that strange, printed letter. Suppose we look at it again."

Mulvaney produced the message which, strangely, had been wholly elusive when Mrs. Baxter staged such an interesting battle for a mere glimpse at its contents.

"We really should consider this more carefully," Kairns decided. "'Spiff', the writer begins. Now suppose we weigh the words. 'I got a line on something today. You know what. Come up tonight, but watch the lights. Make sure this hay-wire bunch has gone to bed. I'll flash the signal from the billiard-room window, you know the one. But go dammed easy. I think the Duke is getting the wind up.' So there you have it, Captain, and at the worst it suggests various curious features."

Kairns glanced up expectantly, but Mulvaney was not to be trapped into comment.

"You first, my dear Amor," he grinned.

"All right. A strange mixture, is it not? An attempt in spots to be crude; yet for the most part suggesting something far beyond that. Now that spelling of the word 'dammed' is obviously a fake. The use of the words 'Spiff' and 'the Duke' suggest the underworld. The surface reading we take it, of course, is that Frank Ashley, alias Roger Hamstead, was Spiff . . . that he was known familiarly under that name in some definite circle. . . . Circles of crime go in for that sort of thing, though such nicknames are not entirely rare in normal circles. But when coupled with 'the Duke' it becomes positively suggestive. Now, I wonder, Mul, who is the Duke?"

Mulvaney hesitated a moment.

"I suppose," he felt his way cautiously, "it could be Horace Madden. We know Madden ordered Hamstead off the grounds, and he could have had some reason for that, other than the fact that Hamstead was really Mrs. Madden's fourth."

"Probably," Kairns agreed, then he produced the envelope which he had received earlier in the morning from "Benito".

He compared the addresses on the two envelopes for some time.

"The one from 'Benito', but actually sent by Phipps, is in regular, flowing hand," he remarked at length, "and that makes it extremely difficult to find any basis of comparison with a printed address. And yet, Mul, that brings up another point. Why, in the name of all that is sane, was that letter printed?"

"That's had me stopped ever since I saw it," Mulvaney admitted. "We know from what we have seen of Burleigh, that the only way Hamstead could have got it was through some privately arranged post-office, a hollow tree, goodness knows what. And under those circumstances, why . . . as you say . . . ?"

"Devilish queer," Kairns reflected. "There is only one way Hamstead could have received the letter; and yet, if

that way was used, why an address at all? But there is a point from these addresses, Mul. Do you detect it?"

The Captain studied the two envelopes.

"The ink is different," he said, some moments later. "One is a distinct black, the other is blue. That may help some. I'll have a try at that up at The Briars. But unless it is surface stuff, it will be hard to make anything of it."

"Unless we enlist Mrs. Baxter's support," Kairns grinned; and at that moment a knock sounded at the door.

It was scarcely an ordinary knock. The mere rapidity of the rat-tat suggested a temperament slightly keyed.

Mulvaney stepped to the door hurriedly. It was Mrs. Baxter; and her cheeks were somewhat flushed, while her eyes had taken on eager lights.

"I didn't want to interrupt," she said, almost breathlessly, "but there isn't any time to lose. Mrs. Parsons is holding the long-distance, and she can't do that very long."

"The long-distance?" said Mulvaney. "For me? Or for Mr. Kairns?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Baxter, still breathlessly, "I should have explained. It's a long-distance call for that Mr. Kingdon up at The Briars. The moment Mrs. Parsons heard of it at the switchboard, she delayed the call and rang me up to ask what should be done about it. She thought, you know, that possibly you . . . You understand?"

"You mean she thought we might want to . . ." Mulvaney began, then hesitated.

"Listen," said Mrs. Baxter, still hurriedly. "And she doesn't want to delay the call much longer."

"It's dashed smart of her," Mulvaney declared, with outward sincerity. "And you can tell her that for me."

Mulvaney glanced at Kairns.

"You first, my dear Captain," Kairns returned. "The police, of course, must perform their curious duty."

Mulvaney did not wait longer. But Mrs. Baxter delayed her departure.

"I think Mr. Mulvaney was right," she said, when

Kairns did not appear disposed to continue the conversation. "It was smart of Mrs. Parsons—decidedly smart for her. But of course we had previously discussed what should be done in case of such an emergency."

"So the credit really belongs to you," Kairns complimented; but Mrs. Baxter's eyes had taken on a hungry gleam.

"She'll miss the conversation," she declared anxiously. "I hadn't thought of that."

"You mean there is room for only one person to listen in at Central?"

"I'll see." Mrs. Baxter's anxiety deepened, and she departed so hastily that it was almost certain she would again be breathless when she reached the scene of operations.

Mulvaney returned a few minutes later.

"It was a long-distance call from Royalston," he reported. "You know, the nearest town with a telegraph wire. The call was merely relaying a wire to Jasper Kingdon. It was from New York, and was apparently unsigned. All it said was 'Will check Honduras. Am working through Washington; but must have time.' That's all there was to it, Amor. Interesting, is it not?"

Kairns agreed.

"But possibly no more interesting than Kingdon's reactions," Mulvaney added. "When Royalston completed the message and rang off, Kingdon remained on the wire and asked for Mrs. Parsons. Then he asked her, please, if any other call came through, not to ring The Briars and announce that it was a long-distance; but merely to get him on the wire and ask him to come down to Central. So what have we?"

Kairns did not attempt to answer at once.

CHAPTER XVIII

"So what have we?" Kairns repeated Mulvaney's question. "I see four points, though possibly there may be more. First, and the most obvious, Jasper Kingdon has an agent—or should we call him an associate?—in New York. Second, he was apparently in touch with the associate from Ridgeport this morning, probably by wire, since all the information contained in the answering wire could have been imparted by telephone conversation in a few moments and would have removed the necessity for the associate to wire Kingdon. Kingdon's wire evidently used pressure, for the part of the answer which says 'must have time' suggests a protest. So we know Kingdon is pretty well disturbed over something."

"And," Mulvaney interrupted, "that queer note to 'Spiff' suggested that the Duke had his wind up."

"Fascinating," Kairns observed. "I wonder was that note genuine? It begins to look as though it could be—with Jasper Kingdon serving as the Duke. Third, Mrs. Baxter evidently was right when she said Kingdon was anxious to conceal his movements from somebody at The Briars. For his message to Mrs. Parsons at the switch-board indicates that he doesn't want The Briars to know he has been in touch with anybody. So that means Kingdon is pressing for speed, but hopes to work without being detected. Fourth, the answer of Kingdon's associate stating he is working through Washington could indicate that there is contact with some government department, but does not prove it. Fifth—and this just occurs to me . . . Kingdon's associate is checking with Honduras. And who, Mul, comes from Honduras?"

"That is easy," Mulvaney replied readily. "That foreign-looking chap, Leander Augustini."

"And, according to Lucy Jupp's acute hearing, Mrs. Madden was planning an expedition to Honduras. So the ripples begin to spread. It looks, Mul, as though there were something big in the background—but of course there has to be when a murder is staged in Mrs. Ashley Madden's billiard-room. Good heavens, Mul! An ex-husband murdered . . . an expedition to Honduras . . . Kingdon desperate over something connected with Honduras——"

"Or with Augustini," Mulvaney interrupted.

"Granted, Mul . . . a queer butler and a queer housemaid, neither of whom seems genuine. . . . And all those clues left behind. Suppose for the moment we sum up those obvious clues, Mul. Do you mind listing them?"

Mulvaney prepared a list which ran like this :

Fragment torn from a pale-blue scarf, caught in the murder-chair ; later identified as belonging to Jessie Burn, who did not make any attempt to conceal the fact.

Handkerchief found in the buffet stained with blood. Bears initials of Mrs. Madden, who did not make any attempt to deny the ownership. Looked as though it had been used casually to help open bottle of rum, and was then tossed aside and forgotten. But Phipps pointed out that blood must have got on handkerchief *after* the murder, while the rum-bottle must have been opened *before* the murder, since murderer left glass partly filled.

Cigarette-stubs found in ash-tray on murder-table, bearing letter S. Correspond to Tubby Sangster's private brand—or so we believe until analysis report comes in. Sangster clearly confused when point was first brought to his attention, but later thanked us for "the tip".

Finger-prints of five people found in billiard-room.

Dr. Karl Dunmore's prints on rum-glass which had evidently been used by the murderer. At least, it was in the position on the table opposite the chair which the murderer must have occupied.

Phipps' prints on second rum-bottle. Entirely natural, as he took the trouble to point out to us that the print corresponded with his manner of pouring liquor.

Jasper Kingdon's prints on a decanter of rye.

Lucy Jupp's prints on the murder-table near the back, where she might have spread her hand in the ordinary course of clearing the table earlier in the evening. Prints were so near the wall that two people could have sat at the table for some time, drinking, without disturbing them. But also might have been made at the time of the murder.

Lucy Jupp apparently is somehow associated with Phipps.

Leander Augustini's prints on the unopened section of the french window, at the approximate point where a person's hand would fall if he reached out and closed the window. Phipps was at some trouble to explain to us that the section of the window which was found closed would open automatically with the first section, and that the person who opened it would likely reach out and close it again.

Other points :

Phipps seen in company with Roger Hamstead.

Frank Ashley, alias Hamstead, ordered off the grounds by Horace Madden.

Murder evidently committed with Madden's revolver, but it was kept in the desk of the library where almost any person might have found it. Revolver left in the woods near a pathway, where it would be natural for some person to find it without effort. But the silencer, undoubtedly placed where it was intended to be found, had been cleaned after use.

Daisy Spencer acting strangely. Her claim of possessing the psychic gift looks like hokum. Could be possible, by one chance in a hundred ; but greater probability is that she either knows or suspects the identity of the murderer and is attempting open blackmail by positive threats to describe him in public ; or that she is using the psychic gift hokum to turn suspicion away from herself. For she was seen leaving Jessie Burn's room through the afternoon prior to the murder, and it was Miss Burn's scarf which was caught in the murder-chair.

Kairns studied the analysis for some time.

"Rather well done," he complimented. "So you are not fond of our baby-eyed Spencer?"

"The woman is an idiot!" Mulvaney declared, with emphasis.

"You forget her Hollywood training."

"That probably accounts for it," Mulvaney returned grimly. "Anyway, you have warned her yourself several times that she was playing with fire."

"Yes," Kairns agreed, "it is a most peculiar role for a woman to play. If she actually is the murderess, she is only calling attention to herself by her strange actions—for it is slightly idiotic to think any person would really believe in her psychic gift. And if she saw something on the night of the murder or has a sound suspicion as to the guilty party . . . well, she is just inviting disaster, that is

all. For if some person wearing a sports coat actually passed through the billiard-room doorway shortly before the murder, he must be pretty jumpy by this time. But suppose we forget Daisy Spencer and get to work on that expedition to Honduras."

An attempt was made, but progress was blocked by a figure which occupied a wicker chair near the foot of the stairway. She was, apparently, engrossed in a magazine; but the chair was so placed that it was difficult to make a dignified descent into the main rotunda of the Orient Hotel without suggesting a readjustment of physical relations.

It was Miss Fargo; and when the keen old eyes glanced up from the magazine they seemed astonished.

"These writers are such curious people, don't you think so, Mr. Kairns?" she asked. "But really, I didn't intend to speak of that at all, when there is so much in life that matters. Mrs. Baxter was very kind. She said we might step into her private living-room."

Mamie Fargo led the way, as though there could be no disputing the point. Then she looked at Kairns sagely.

"You really should know Aunt Sarah Jane," she said, and the diversion was almost a shock. "She is so keen, so observant, though possibly that is because of her unfortunate handicap. It is such a trying thing to be afflicted with rheumatism; but Aunt Sarah Jane smiles through it all and she has trained herself to keep her thoughts away from herself. That is so helpful. Poor dear!"

"I have heard she is very acute." Kairns felt his way carefully.

"Decidedly acute," Miss Fargo assured. "There is one part of the message to Mr. Kingdon which she does not understand at all, so she is working on that now. But perhaps you would like to hear about the silencer? Though it is just a thought of hers and of mine."

Mamie Fargo twisted her head to one side expectantly.

"Admirable," Kairns encouraged. "I felt something dramatic was coming, Miss Fargo."

"Not really dramatic." Mamie Fargo smiled her appreciation. "And yet I do think it is positively clever. And I can say that, since all the real work was done by Aunt Sarah Jane. It was her suggestion, you know, that we should make use of Lizzie Murdock. You understand, Lizzie Murdock, one of the village girls working up at The Briars."

"I am always a good listener," Kairns suggested.

"Of course I must admit that all the credit belongs to Aunt Sarah Jane, if anything comes out of it. But Aunt Sarah Jane was greatly—what is the word you use? Intrigued, is it not? . . . Anyway, she was much interested in that silencer. In fact, she couldn't keep her mind off it last night after she heard Mr. Madden had admitted the ownership of the revolver, but denied that there was a silencer. I think this is quite clever, Mr. Kairns. For Aunt Sarah Jane couldn't see why Mr. Madden should admit the revolver and deny the silencer, if there really was one. Can you, Mr. Kairns?"

"You shame me into a confession, Miss Fargo. The point hadn't occurred to me; and now that you bring it up, I do not detect any ready explanation."

"Neither could Aunt Sarah Jane," Miss Fargo declared, with a slight flush of victory on her cheeks. "And there isn't any ready explanation—though there might be an obscured one. But as I said, Aunt Sarah Jane couldn't get the point off her mind. You would be surprised how it helped her keep her mind off her rheumatism. And then it occurred to her that if it was any person other than Mr. Madden who shot Mr. Hamstead, it must have been a matter of the murderer having a revolver of his own with a silencer, and taking the silencer to put on Mr. Madden's revolver. So she started to look for the other revolver."

Miss Fargo waited for that to register.

"But I thought she had rheumatism," Kairns objected.

"So she has. But you know Lizzie Murdock. She is under quite an obligation to Aunt Sarah Jane, but we don't

need to go into that. So we invited Lizzie down to Dr. Thorley's last evening—while the doctor was absent, of course—and Aunt Sarah Jane suggested to Lizzie that she would be greatly obliged if . . . You understand?"

"Oh," said Kairns, "I think I do! The suggestion was that Lizzie, having access to the rooms at The Briars, might . . ."

"Exactly. And there was no harm in that—not the least; for when it comes to doing battle with a murderer a person may be permitted to be slightly irregular. But we do not need to discuss that, for I know you are broad-minded, Mr. Kairns—and you too, Captain."

Captain Mulvaney, faced suddenly with such an accusation, bowed to conceal his momentary confusion.

"Lizzie Murdock had ample opportunity during breakfast-hour this morning to make a careful examination. . . . You understand?"

"Exactly," said Kairns.

"And the curious part of it is that there is no extra revolver in any of the rooms of the guests at The Briars. Lizzie is most thorough, though she is only a village girl. Aunt Sarah Jane trained her for two years."

"Yes, she is thorough," Kairns agreed.

"So you see where that brings us?" Miss Fargo's animated cheeks had grown brighter still. "No extra revolver at The Briars from which the silencer could have been taken! And this is really quite clever of Aunt Sarah Jane. You understand, Mr. Kairns, what is on her mind?"

"Possibly; but you explain it most effectively."

"Thank you, Mr. Kairns. A person does not carry a silencer around with him, not even people of the sort now at The Briars. That sort might carry a revolver, *with* a silencer, but not a silencer alone. Am I—I mean, is Aunt Sarah Jane right?"

"It is admirable reasoning," Kairns assured her.

"So I thought. Of course, we do not know that the murderer was one of the guests. But it means that if

any one of the guests was the murderer, something happened between that person and Mr. Hamstead which led to the murder; but the murderer did not have a silencer at the time, though he felt he must have one. So you see what must have happened. He left The Briars a day before the murder—two days, perhaps, or three days—and went out to some place where he could purchase a silencer. You see”—Mamie Fargo’s voice became quite modest—“Aunt Sarah Jane suggests that if you could learn which person made a trip out to Ridgeport, or some other such place, a day or two, or possibly only a few hours before the murder, you might be on the right track.”

Miss Fargo enjoyed a few moments of triumph; then, as though the world held more important work for busy brains to do, she turned and left them.

Amor Kairns watched the retreating figure.

“What a remarkable person is Aunt Sarah Jane,” he observed; but Mulvaney seemed slightly perturbed.

CHAPTER XIX

ON second thoughts, Aunt Sarah Jane's line of reasoning did not appear quite so secure.

"Well done, of course," Kairns remarked, as Mulvaney was still inclined to scowl. "But there is another side to that picture, Captain. We have plenty of grounds for believing that our murderer is abnormally clever; so that is exactly what a clever murderer would do. He would, let us surmise, be carrying a revolver with a silencer, not with any definite thought in mind, but just as a habit. Then an emergency arises. He has learned that Madden's revolver is kept in the desk in the library. So he removes the silencer from his own weapon, attaches it to Madden's, commits the murder, leaves the Madden revolver and his own silencer where they will be readily found, then makes a thorough job of disposing of his own weapon."

Mulvaney brightened perceptibly.

"That's more like it," he agreed. "And if you ask me, Amor, I'm not taken with these old women prying into affairs."

"But you must admit they have been useful," Kairns countered.

The next objective was The Briars, in the hope of learning some of the details concerning the Honduras expedition.

When they reached the street it was apparent that Mamie Fargo was already working on Aunt Sarah Jane's latest theory of the silencer, for she had stopped in front of Wilkes' garage and was engaging the proprietor in conversation. Kairns watched the pair for a moment.

"I think, Captain," he decided, "we can safely leave that phase of the inquiry in the hands of Miss Fargo. If, by chance, Aunt Sarah Jane's reasoning is accurate,

and if some member of The Briars did make a trip out to Ridgeport or any other place for a silencer, we can rely upon Burleigh to discover that fact, if any trail whatever was left behind. For my part, I am curious to know if Mrs. Madden knew Roger Hamstead was one of her ex-husbands."

The ever-present Phipps met them at the front doorway of The Briars. His eyes did not exactly brighten with their arrival, yet there was some suggestion on his well-fixed countenance that they were welcome. Phipps paused several seconds longer than a well-trained butler should have paused, with his hand still on the door. Then, without removing the hand, he coughed slightly.

"You will pardon me, sir." He looked at Mulvaney, but seemed to be speaking to Kairns. "May I be permitted a suggestion?"

"Always," Kairns returned heartily.

"Thank you, sir, you have been exceedingly kind. I was merely thinking that if you had come to question Mr. Kingdon, the time is not the most ideal. He appears a trifle fatigued this morning, and somewhat impatient."

"To question Mr. Kingdon?" Kairns countered.

"It is highly logical, is it not, sir?" Phipps' voice expressed mild surprise. "Particularly after his trip to Ridgeport. You will pardon me, Mr. Kairns, for having heard of that. But you understand the relations between Mary Roper and the butcher boy. The butcher boy passed Mr. Wilkes' garage shortly after a copy of the *Ridgeport Post* fell from Mr. Kingdon's car. It is quite simple, sir. But I have spoken to Mary Roper and have asked her not to mention the incident to other members of the household."

"Thoughtful of you, Phipps." Kairns considered him doubtfully. "But may I ask the reason?"

"It is quite simple, sir. When a gentleman like Mr. Kingdon makes such a startling journey so early in the morning, there must be a reason. The journey could have

been made later in the day, and more leisurely, except . . . You understand why, Mr. Kairns."

"Do we, Phipps?"

"If you do not, you will pardon my boldness if I suggest that it must have been because he did not care for members of the household to know the trip had been taken. So I have spoken to Mary Roper."

Phipps' hand remained on the door.

"Fact of the matter is," Kairns' glance remained fixed for a moment on the butler's barring hand, "we came to see Mrs. Madden."

"Oh!" said Phipps, as the hand fell to his side. "Thank you, sir. This way. . . ."

Phipps led the way to the reception-room. He turned to leave them; then he turned back again, and again he coughed slightly.

"I fear, Mr. Kairns," he said, "my boldness is becoming overpowering this morning. But I felt you would be interested in the fact that Miss Spencer is making more rapid progress with her psychic memory."

"Thanks, Phipps; but we heard earlier that she had recalled that the man who passed through the billiard-room doorway was wearing a sports coat."

Phipps' eyes shaded a trifle, almost imperceptibly.

"Events," he replied, "sometimes move swiftly. That was quite early this morning, before breakfast. It is now well after ten o'clock. Miss Spencer's psychic memory has since informed her . . . perhaps not positively. . . . So possibly I should say it has merely suggested the shade of the coat."

"Indeed!" said Kairns, with more than passing interest. "Rather risky, don't you think, Phipps?"

"Doubtless I lack the capacity to judge such matters," Phipps evaded. "I was merely about to repeat the point that Miss Spencer's psychic memory believes the sports coat had a shade like ochre. I will speak to Mrs. Madden, sir."

Phipps turned, but Kairns stepped rapidly between him and the door.

"You have a most delightful way with you, Phipps," he complimented. "But why leave a pleasing morsel of food poised half-way to the lips?"

Phipps' well-controlled eyes suggested mild surprise.

"That is all Miss Spencer's psychic memory has recalled, as yet," he replied.

"Possibly," Kairns agreed. "But a sports coat, of the shade of ochre, I assume, is not difficult to locate at The Briars."

"Indeed it is not, sir. There are only four sports coats, of the male variety, at The Briars. You wished to speak to Mrs. Madden?"

Kairns laughed a trifle, and Phipps appeared astonished. At least, his eyes widened a bare fraction, but he paused in his gesture of turning towards the door.

"Perhaps I am at fault, sir," Phipps continued. "I can see that I may have been guilty of arousing your curiosity, and in that case it becomes my gentlemanly duty to gratify it. There are four sports coats at The Briars, but none which I would define exactly as ochre. There is a dark blue, with dull-brown trimmings, worn occasionally by Mr. Augustini; there is a light blue, almost pale blue, of the same shade as Miss Burn's scarf, worn by Mr. Kingdon; there is a rather heavy tweed coat, coarse material, sir, but light grey, worn by Mr. Madden; and there is a coat, of a mixture between sandy and fawn, worn by Dr. Dunmore. So you observe, sir, that there is not a sports coat at The Briars of an ochre shade."

Kairns considered that for a moment, until Phipps again made a gesture of turning towards the door.

"I see," Kairns returned slowly. "Rather good work on Miss Spencer's part, do you not think so, Phipps?"

It was Phipps' turn to consider the matter at length.

"If you were regarding it from the angle of suggesting that it permits her the latitude of adjusting her viewpoint slightly, when her psychic mind has functioned more accurately, I would say that it is indeed good work, sir."

Again Phipps made a gesture of departing, and this time

Kairns did not interrupt. Instead, he pondered the square shoulders as the bronzed and somewhat youthful butler passed through the doorway.

"And if you asked me," Mulvaney broke into the ensuing silence, "I would say Dr. Dunmore's coat comes nearest to fitting Miss Spencer's description."

"Description?" Kairns questioned; but the Captain ignored the inflection.

"And I would like to recall that it was Dr. Dunmore's finger-prints which were found on the rum-glass. . . . Oh!"

Phipps had returned, somewhat unexpectedly. He had, apparently, been just beyond the door-jamb.

"You will pardon me, sir," he said, "for overhearing that chance remark, but I returned to ask if you wished Miss Burn in Mrs. Madden's presence . . . this time?"

There was a vague suggestion that it might be as well if matters were arranged otherwise.

"What would you advise, Phipps?" Kairns asked.

"I would say, sir," he returned slowly, "if I were to be so bold as to comment on the characteristics of my employers, that you might possibly discover that Mrs. Madden, without the support of Miss Burn, may be quite a different person. If there were any important point which I wished to discuss with her . . . You understand?"

"Such as a salary increase," Kairns rounded out the phrase. "I think, Phipps, we will take your advice in this matter."

"Thank you, sir."

Phipps reached the doorway once more, paused again, then returned.

"You will pardon me, sir," he said to Captain Mulvaney, "for the chance incident which permitted me to hear your observation that it was Dr. Karl Dunmore's finger-prints which were found on the rum-glass. You will recall I had observed that there were such prints. But has it occurred to you that there was anything peculiar in the position of those finger-prints with relation to the chair the murderer was occupying? But pardon my boldness."

This time Phipps really departed, and he did not return at once. Mulvaney stepped to the doorway and peered into the long hall.

"Gone," he said, as though he doubted his own eyes. "So he got that point out of us! What do you think of it, Amor?"

"I think," Kairns returned, "that Phipps is either extremely fortunate or extremely clever. He is also abnormally useful to us, or he is much less collected than he appears on the surface. And as for the position of the rum-glass and the murderer's chair, what do you recall, Mul?"

Mulvaney appeared to be studying the doorway, as though he expected Phipps' return.

"I think I have it clearly enough," he replied at length. "You will have to picture a small table with one end—not a side—against the wall. Hamstead's chair was facing the table almost directly, and the body was slumped over it. Assuming you were the wall, looking down the length of the table, Hamstead was seated on the left of it. The other chair would be at the right of the table, with its back almost flat against the wall, as though the murderer sat there sideways."

"Just what I remembered," Kairns agreed. "As a matter of fact, the picture I have had in mind, concerning the murderer, is that he must have been sitting there, with his left side towards the table, and accordingly towards Hamstead; that he probably had his left elbow on the table and was toying with his rum-glass with his left hand, sipping now and then, while he fingered the revolver with his right hand, possibly in his pocket, possibly under the table. . . . Fascinating, is it not? For if you will take the trouble to check, Mul, you will discover that it was a couple of prints from Dr. Dunmore's *right* hand which were found on the rum-glass. Curious, as Phipps suggests. . . . But how in the name of creation did he know they were prints from the right hand. . . ?"

"Pardon me, sir," Phipps' voice interrupted from the

doorway. "I was not aware of that fact. The point which interested me with relation to the rum-glass was that there were, at the most, only two or three prints. Quite distinct. I felt, though I am not at all gifted in such matters, that there should have been many prints, much blurred; and that it would be good fortune only which would provide you with one clear enough to read. . . . But I am becoming bold again. Mrs. Madden will see you, sir, and she is alone."

"Used your influence, eh, Phipps?" Kairns asked; but the butler merely stepped back politely and waited for them to pass through the doorway.

They found Mrs. Madden in a corner of the lower living-room, and when Phipps bowed artistically and left them, it became apparent that the butler had some gifts as a psychologist. For while there was little change in Mrs. Madden, from the strictly physical aspect, it was nevertheless evident that she was quite a different woman from the placid individual who had played such an inconspicuous role on the occasions of their earlier visits.

From the purely physical angle, Mrs. Ashley Madden was still the unobtrusive head of The Briars who favoured dull shawls about her shoulders, and a sober, almost severe, parting of the hair which somehow suggested an earlier generation. The shawl was still there; and, if anything, it was of an even less conspicuous shade than the ones they had already seen. The hair, possibly, was a trifle more severe; while her dress was almost austere. But those features were purely artificial. When it came to the eyes and the poise, this was quite a different Mrs. Madden. Even at first glance, it appeared that she had taken on some of the evangelistic fervour which had so often lifted her to the dangerous heights. The eyes seemed burning, while the pose was restless despite the fact that she occupied a comfortable arm-chair and that a stool had been arranged for her feet. But one foot kept shifting away from the stool, and even before Kairns had suggested that the weather was ideal, she made an attempt to rise, then sank back again.

"Yes, it is a delightful day," Mrs. Madden returned, in quite a different voice from the well-controlled efforts of the previous evening. "But you didn't come to tell me that. I would suggest that Jessie Burn is apt to return at any moment, though Phipps has assured me he will delay her."

That was almost an invitation for Kairns to take advantage of the spirit of evangelism which, queerly enough, conveyed a vague suggestion of confession.

"Thank you, Mrs. Madden." Kairns' voice became wholly business-like. "You are quite right that we did not come to discuss the weather. In that event, do you mind informing me if you were aware of the fact that Roger Hamstead was Frank Ashley, your former husband?"

"One of my former husbands." Mrs. Madden's voice, sharply emotional, threw a sidelight on the woman's variegated past. "Yes, certainly I was aware of that fact. But I did not explain that point to you last night because I discussed it with Jessie—Miss Burn, I mean—and she decided . . . I mean, she thought it would not be wise. I apologize now."

That was clearly a touch of evangelistic confession.

"Then, do you mind telling me what Frank Ashley was doing in Burleigh?"

Mrs. Madden glanced hurriedly towards the door, and her manner became still more restless.

"I don't know"; her voice suddenly became a torrent. "I would tell you if I knew. I wish you could tell me. I know a little, very little; but I will tell you that. I recognized Frank two or three days after he arrived at the Orient Hotel. I had walked to the village, and we met on the street. I was willing to recognize him, but he passed me as though we were complete strangers. That was his right, for I was the one who cast him aside. I did not go to the village after that, except in the car, but I saw him several times from the car window. When he did not leave, I sent word for him to come up to The Briars. Jessie and I talked it over; we thought that was the best thing to do. Jessie

insisted we should know what had brought him to Burleigh. He was getting on my nerves, and Jessie insisted for my own good that I should speak to Frank. So she took a message to him . . . waited her chance until she met him casually on the street, then asked him to come up to The Briars late at night. He came, a few nights ago, around midnight. Jessie and I met him, on the verandah outside the billiard-room. We questioned him, but . . .”

Mrs. Madden paused purely for lack of breath. The confessional spirit did not appear to have dulled.

“But,” she went on, more slowly, “he did not explain. He merely said he was in Burleigh in a professional capacity, that it actually had something to do with me, but that he could not explain. . . . It was too early, though he might later. We were obliged to leave it at that. But it was unfortunate that we sent for him. Mr. Madden met him on the driveway as he was returning to the village. They did not quarrel, for it takes two to make a quarrel; but Mr. Madden must have been . . . horrible. . . . That is the word. He is jealous, insanely jealous at times. He tried to quarrel with Frank. I know that from his manner and words when he returned. He told me he ordered Frank off the premises, and told him to stay away. Jealousy. That was all. I tried to explain; but I do not know if I succeeded. And . . .”

Mrs. Madden shuddered. It was difficult to decide if the gesture were genuine or artificial. But she looked at Cairns appealingly.

“I think I understand,” he replied. “It is a difficult and embarrassing matter, but you were about to say that jealousy can sometimes go to extremes, and you were uncertain, in this case, if it had superseded better judgment.”

Mrs. Madden did not answer. But her fingers persisted in twining about each other, and at times they seemed to become tangled in the fringe of the dull shawl.

Kairns waited patiently.

“Jessie would not like this,” Mrs. Madden said after a long pause.

"Then that is all you can tell us about Frank Ashley's visit to Burleigh?"

"Everything, though I intended to try to learn more. Now it is too late. And he said it concerned me in some way."

"Yet you have your own theories as to who made it too late," Cairns suggested quietly. "The point, I know, is difficult, but possibly we may be of some assistance to you."

"No, I haven't my own theories," she said, though the slight defiance in the tone indicated that the opposite might be the case. "There is evidence against Horace, I know. . . . The revolver. It was his. He does not deny it. . . . Oh! Have you asked him that?"

"Yes. So you may rest assured, Mrs. Madden, that you have not imparted any incriminating information against your husband."

"There is evidence against me," she hurried on. "My handkerchief. Stained with blood, was it not?"

Kairns nodded.

"That must have happened *after* Frank was killed. Jessie and I have discussed that. The blood could not have got on the handkerchief in any other manner. So you have evidence against me, and against Jessie. The blue scarf, you know. But . . . that is all I know."

For a moment it appeared that the emotion of confession had all but spent itself. Mrs. Madden glanced once more towards the door and, when she settled back in her chair, much of the restlessness had left her. For the fingers were almost still, and some of the fire was dying from her eyes.

"There is another point." Cairns hurried to stir into life the old spirit of evangelism. "You have been so obliging and helpful, Mrs. Madden, that I am hoping you will give us some of the details concerning the proposed expedition to Honduras."

Mrs. Madden's eyes became a conflict. It was a mild battle between the calm of the previous evening and the emotion of the morning. Suddenly the flame leaped back

into her eyes, and her fingers resumed their restless journeying through the fringe of the drab shawl.

"You know about that?" she asked, with a high pitch in her voice.

"A little."

"It was not my doing"—that came with a touch of resentment; then she paused, but since the fire still showed in her eyes, Kairns remained silent.

"It was somebody else's idea," Mrs. Madden hurried on. "Jessie's. Jasper Kingdon's. I do not know where it started. But it was another case of . . ."

Mrs. Madden caught herself suddenly. She clicked her lips as though locking them upon a secret.

Kairns waited for a time, but Mrs. Madden merely tightened the shawl about her shoulders and seemed to be building up a reserve.

"You were about to say," Kairns spoke measuredly, "that it was another case of . . . of developing a stunt."

She did not answer, but her eyes flickered.

"A publicity stunt?" Kairns went on.

"Yes," Mrs. Madden declared, and it came so suddenly as to seem like an explosion. "It seems my whole life has been that . . . stunts . . . stunts . . . publicity stunts . . . one after the other. The world blames me . . . I know, but it is not all my fault."

"Of course not," Kairns sympathized. "So this expedition to Honduras was to be another publicity stunt, arranged—or should we say worked up?—by some of the people around you. Possibly by Miss Burn; possibly by Mr. Kingdon. You will pardon me, Mrs. Madden, if I suggest that does not give us any new information. We suspected as much."

"You don't blame me?" Mrs. Madden asked, and if the anxiety in her tone were not sincere it was at least good acting.

"In view of the manner in which the great American public falls down on its knees and worships that sort of thing," Kairns returned slowly, "I cannot say that I really

blame any person for taking advantage of that form of national insanity, if it means anything to the individual. So possibly we can afford to overlook that element. The more important point is that the proposed stunt has run foul of events. It has ended in murder. Our problem—yours and mine, Mrs. Madden—is to attempt to learn how any phase of the Honduras undertaking could have resulted in the death of Roger Hamstead. Mr. Hamstead, you have informed us, told you and Miss Burn that his professional duty in Burleigh was somehow connected with you. Have you discovered the connection?"

Mrs. Madden shook her head so sharply that the severe part of her hair lost some of its stern effect.

"I have tried to think," she said. "But I cannot see any possible connection."

"Then possibly if we consider the personnel of the proposed party, we might arrive at something definite."

Mrs. Madden considered that for some time, and for a moment it appeared that the evangelistic fever was cooling.

"I will tell you all I know about it," she returned more slowly, as the more practical phase of existence began to crowd out the fever of emotion. "I first heard of it from Jessie, about six months ago. Jessie, you know, has been with me for many years and has always been alert to such possibilities. You understand, it is her profession. She had been talking it over with Jasper Kingdon, and while I think Jasper first proposed the plan to Jessie, I cannot be positive. I have known Jasper too for some years."

"Where does he come from?"

"New York. Jasper is a good boy; gambles, I know, and possibly has no visible means of support, yet always manages to do very well for himself. So I was not surprised when I heard he and Jessie had been talking over the plan. Jasper, it appears, had met Mr. Augustini in Washington, in diplomatic circles. Mr. Augustini was representing Honduras on some mission; I do not know what, for such matters never interest me. Mr. Augustini is a cousin of some government official in Honduras. As I understand it,

he was telling an interesting story one day about Honduras—it concerned ancient treasure from the days of the old Spaniards . . . there was a tradition ; certain gold was supposed to be buried somewhere in the mountains. Jasper heard the story, then he told it to Jessie. I do not know if he merely told it as a story, or if he already had the idea of the expedition in mind. But I do know that the plan grew out of that story. Honduras is so distant that it looked like an interesting trip. It would provide variety, for both Jessie and I were becoming a little weary of the quiet life in Burleigh. So the plan was one of those things which just grew up. Somebody suggested that we should have a geologist. . . . Or is that what you call it ?”

“Archaeologist,” Kairns suggested.

“Both, I think,” Mrs. Madden considered. “For there was also some talk of ancient Spanish ruins. So Dr. Dunmore was invited. He is both a geologist and an archaeologist. Then Jessie thought it would be a good idea to have some person along to take pictures. She always has an eye on the . . . on the publicity possibilities. I suppose, Mr. Kairns, that I may as well be frank, now that I have gone this far.”

“Exactly,” Kairns encouraged.

“So Daisy Spencer was invited. I think that was Jasper’s selection, for I had not met her previously. Leander Augustini, of course, was invited . . .”

“Invited ?” Kairns interposed, and Mrs. Madden seemed interested in his inflection.

“I hadn’t thought of it in quite that way,” she replied. “But I do not think he invited himself.”

“You are quite certain the whole scheme did not originate with Mr. Augustini ?”

Again Mrs. Madden appeared puzzled.

“Yes, of course,” she said ; then, more slowly, “No, I am not. The plan grew up, but I do not know the details. But it did seem essential to invite Mr. Augustini, since Jasper had become so well acquainted with him in Washington. That made the whole party : Jessie, myself,

Jasper Kingdon, Leander Augustini, and Dr. Dunmore. Though of course there would be our maids and chefs, and native guides, carriers, boatmen, and workers of that sort to be engaged in Honduras. But I mean we five were to make up the main party."

"Five?" Kairns asked. "I thought there were to be six."

"Six? Oh, I see, you are thinking of Mr. Sangster. No, Mr. Sangster was not invited. He does not seem the type of person one would ask; for there would be some physical effort on the trip, and I doubt if Mr. Sangster would care for that. He doesn't play tennis."

"Yet he is here," Kairns pressed, and Mrs. Madden scarcely knew how to meet that situation.

"I think Jessie explained last evening," she returned, "that Tubby Sangster more or less inserted himself into the party. He has a pleasing way, you know. But that is really all I know."

Possibly there was more, but Mrs. Madden was shifting back rapidly to the cold and calculating publicity-seeker who values stunts for their lineage in the newspapers and who can turn even the flame of evangelism to the same dull end. Her eyes were becoming cool, and the fingers had ceased their restless roving.

Kairns rose.

"There is only one more point at the moment," he said. "I wish you would attempt to recall, Mrs. Madden, if any definite person suggested that you should bring your jewels to Burleigh."

The cool eyes lost some of their coolness. A flash of suspicion showed for a moment, then was gone almost instantly.

"Why, certainly," she returned readily. "That is not difficult. But you are wrong there, Mr. Kairns. The point has no significance whatever. It was Jessie who suggested it. Jessie is really clever, in her own way. It was her idea that we should have this party at The Briars, to enable us all to get better acquainted; but she did not intend to let even that pass without—as she expressed it—preparing

the way for later news items. That was her work. There was to be a ball, Mr. Kairns, possibly a week from now, though the date was not fixed. We were to be . . ."

Mrs. Madden paused and a sudden smile flashed to her lips.

"You are a man of the world, Mr. Kairns," she added; "I do not see the slightest occasion to attempt to conceal anything from you. That, I fear, would be futile. So, as Jessie put it, we were to be peculiar. She thought that might produce a few lines in the newspapers. So we were to invite only the people of Burleigh. I was to wear my jewels as a tribute to them, though they are not all here. Some . . . enough for that."

Kairns bowed.

"You are a remarkably discerning woman," he said. "And Miss Burn's idea was clever. So you were to wear some of your jewels at the ball; some, but not all. Enough, you suggested. . . . Did you mean enough to create a temptation?"

"Possibly." Mrs. Madden's eyes took on a touch of amusement. "It depends upon personal viewpoint. The jewels in Burleigh are supposed to be worth fifty thousand dollars. In reality, they are possibly worth fifty."

"Oh!" said Kairns. "Substitutes? And who knows that, Mrs. Madden?"

"Mrs. Horace Madden and her jeweller."

"No one else?"

"No one else, except you two gentlemen."

"Interesting," said Amor Kairns.

"Indeed!" responded Mrs. Ashley Madden; and the gleam of amusement in her eyes became more pronounced. Assuredly there was no suggestion now of the evangelist.

CHAPTER XX

PHIPPS was just outside the living-room door. He created the impression of hovering. Jessie Burn occupied a chair in the spacious hallway. She created the impression of a prisoner who requires a guard.

As Kairns and Mulvaney appeared, Phipps retreated discreetly. His athletic shoulders suggested that he had performed his duty to the best of his ability.

Jessie Burn rose and studied the retreating figure for a moment or two.

"A most remarkable butler," she observed to Kairns. "Most remarkable, as I have suggested to Mrs. Madden more than once. But excuse me a moment."

Miss Burn stepped through the living-room doorway, but she stopped some two or three paces beyond the threshold. She was clearly pondering the figure of Mrs. Ashley Madden. The latter may, or may not, have been interested. At any rate, she merely looked up, then glanced away again. Jessie Burn returned to the hallway.

"Yes," she remarked to Kairns, "Mrs. Madden is like that."

"Like what?" Kairns appeared surprised; but apparently Miss Burn did not approve of that.

"Surely you observed," she returned shortly. "But in case you did not, she gets her spells of . . . what should I call it? Contrition? Not exactly that, for contrition would suggest cause for repentance. But you must know what I mean. When Mrs. Madden looks like that, you must have learned all she knows, if you are at all clever. Are you?"

"Few people are clever where a clever woman is concerned," Kairns returned vaguely, and even Jessie Burn did not seem to gather the meaning of that.

"Well," she replied doubtfully, "if Mrs. Madden has told you as much as I think she has, you will probably want to ask me some questions ; so we may as well have it out right now."

"War ?" Kairns asked with a smile.

"So she did tell you something ?" Miss Burn countered.

"A lot," Kairns corrected. "And since you have been good enough to pave the way for us, perhaps we can get right down to the centre of things if you will tell us what Frank Ashley meant a few nights ago when he informed Mrs. Madden that his visit to Burleigh concerned her in some manner?"

Miss Burn stared for a moment.

"'Contrition' is the word I should have used," she declared, with a sharp nod. "If she has gone so far as to tell you Roger Hamstead was Frank Ashley, I can imagine she has had a rather bad spell. She always used to have them just before taking the platform for an appeal to the sinners to hit the sawdust trail. Queer, isn't it ? But never mind that. You asked me a question."

"I did," Kairns agreed ; and as Jessie Burn peered at him, it seemed she possessed latent possibilities which did not show casually on the surface.

"All right," she returned. "Fact of the matter is, I don't know what Frank Ashley meant by that. But I read between the lines, and, whether right or wrong, I read the same thing as Horace Madden. That was what gave Horace such a fit of the tantrums. Not that I blame him, since he is so jealous."

"Ho !" said Kairns ; and Jessie Burn peered at him once more.

"No," she returned, "I doubt if you have it exactly. There wasn't any suggestion of old passion leaping into a new flame ; so you have that wrong. Besides, if you knew Mrs. Madden, you would know that while she is capable of emotion, almost to the point of insanity—and who isn't, in the evangelistic line ?—she doesn't go in strong for . . . for the other sort of thing. No, Mr. Kairns, that series of marriages was merely an exploit of convenience,

should we say? But Frank Ashley didn't volunteer any definite information that night, though both Mrs. Madden and I worked on him for some time. But I gathered, from the few things he said and the many things he declined to say, that his visit to Burleigh was somehow for Mrs. Madden's protection."

"Protection?" Kairns demanded. "Why, my dear lady!"

"Thanks," Jessie Burn again nodded sharply. "It's the first time I've heard that for years. Glad I gave you a jolt. Yes, that was it, as nearly as I could judge. And Horace got the same idea; so you understand why he directed Frank Ashley off the premises and invited him to stay there."

Kairns considered Jessie Burn for some time. It was apparent that she was enjoying herself. So he shifted his attack abruptly.

"Then about that Honduras expedition," he said. "Would you mind telling us who first had the idea, yourself or Jasper Kingdon?"

Jessie Burn made a slight whistling sound.

"Not ladylike, is it?" she asked, with a laugh which held little music. "Goodness, what a sermon Mrs. Madden would have preached this morning if there had been a platform ready!"

"And she went so far," Kairns added, "as to admit that the whole thing was a publicity stunt, so we don't need to spar about that part of it at all. But she didn't know who first had the idea."

"The spirit of confession? You amaze me, Mr. Kairns. What a fascinating way you must have with the women! But of course she couldn't answer that question, since she doesn't know. Neither do I."

"Now, Miss Burn . . ." Kairns smiled.

"No, that doesn't have the slightest effect on me," she warned. "Fact is, I don't know; though I have wondered a bit since this murder business. All right, confession is the order of the day. Don't shoot, mister, and I'll tell all I know."

Jessie Burn had suddenly become light-hearted ; but whether or not that was merely acting was difficult to judge.

"I suppose Mrs. Madden has told you about that old Spanish treasure story?" she hurried on ; and Kairns nodded. "Very well. Jasper Kingdon told me the story, as he had it from Leander Augustini. That was months ago. When he finished the story he said something about it being a 'corking chance for Mrs. Madden'. We didn't go into his corking chance then ; but I thought it over, and the next time I saw him we did go into it. So whose idea was it, his or mine ?"

"You being on the scene, may be able to answer," Kairns returned. "If it were left to me, I would say it was a thought cleverly planted by Mr. Kingdon."

All suggestion of lightness left Miss Burn's manner.

"So," she said reflectively. "Used me, did he ? But I don't know. And I thought I was the smart one. Well, now . . ."

She broke off as though slightly irritated.

"And that automatically brings us to a fascinating point," Kairns suggested. "You have already implied that Frank Ashley was in Burleigh for the protection of Mrs. Madden . . . somehow, you do not know quite how. . . . So could it be that his protection had something to do with the Honduras expedition ?"

"Oh Lord !" Jessie Burn exclaimed, as a variety of emotions began to chase one another across her countenance. There was astonishment, a touch of anger, a suggestion of incredulity, a direct rejection of the idea, then a sudden swinging back to amazement.

"I don't know," she said abruptly, in the end. "You'll have to excuse me now."

Miss Burn turned and walked calmly up the broad stairway.

CHAPTER XXI

PHIPPS accompanied them to the main doorway. He somehow left the impression that, otherwise, the door could not have been opened.

"A delightful morning, is it not, sir?" he observed, as he paused rather longer than a well-trained butler should have paused. "And that reminds me, sir. Reverting, as it were, to my previous boldness."

Phipps broke off expectantly.

"Boldness can sometimes be a virtue, Phipps," Cairns returned.

"Thank you, sir. I am not a psychologist; I merely aim to be helpful. So it has occurred to me as peculiar that Mr. Sangster does not wear a sports coat."

"A weakness of his," Cairns suggested.

"Or a matter of his greatest strength," Phipps corrected, "if I may be so bold as to speak of it in that manner. It is purely a matter of viewpoint, sir, but coats have a habit at times of wandering from their rightful ownership. But I fear I transgress. Dr. Dunmore seems quite irritated, does he not, sir?"

Phipps was pondering a figure on the drive. It was clearly Dr. Dunmore, and the red whiskers appeared to bristle. Then Phipps turned and closed the door upon them politely.

"Was he trying to tell us something, Captain?" Cairns asked.

"About all I can be certain of," Mulvaney returned, "is that Tubby Sangster is not one of his favourites. For some reason, Phipps was anxious to have us check up on Sangster's cigarettes and the stubs; and now he casts reflections. And I suppose he is right. It does not necessarily mean that the sand-fawn sports coat, though

owned by Dr. Dunmore, was actually worn by Dunmore."

"Assuming, of course, that Daisy Spencer isn't merely shooting arrows in the dark," Kairns added. "But Phipps was right. Dr. Dunmore does appear slightly irritated."

The archaeologist-geologist was standing in the middle of the gravel driveway. From a distance of thirty yards or so he seemed to be scenting the air like an angry hound. At least, his bristling red whiskers were pointing, his head was thrown back, and there was a definite challenge in his attitude.

But upon nearer range it became evident that surface appearances may be misleading. For his eyes were sparkling and there was a sort of victorious grin at his lips.

"That damned woman," he greeted them with a snapping voice which did not quite match the grinning lips, "has gone and pulled another boner. A bad one this time. It was only a matter of time; she hasn't the brains for anything else."

"What damned woman?" Kairns asked.

"Idiot!" Dr. Dunmore snapped. "There is only one damned woman around this place. Spencer, of course."

"So she has pulled a boner?" Kairns returned. "I presume you mean she has been guilty of some error?"

Dr. Dunmore stared.

"Do I?" He seemed to be finding dim enjoyment somewhere. "Have it your own way. But all I know is that she tried to cuddle up to me a while ago. Look at her now, the putty-faced doll."

Dr. Dunmore's red whiskers began to point again; and when Kairns followed their general signal, it was possible to detect a figure in the distance, at the edge of the woods which skirted The Briars property where the initialled revolver had been found.

"So that is Miss Spencer?" Kairns asked. "Of course, Doctor, you may detect some error in her presence in that particular position; but, if so, you have me at an advantage."

"Have I? Well, I suppose you know she has picked my sports coat . . . you know for what. The putty-

faced—— But I called her that before. The snub-nosed fake of a Hollywood queen. That's good, isn't it?"

Dr. Dunmore appeared pleased with himself. He considered the expression for a moment, then laughed heartily. That left him more human.

"She's an ass," he explained, when the laughter was over. "She thinks everybody else is as dumb as herself. Imagine it, Kairns, the she-ass came up to me five minutes ago and took on that bleary-eyed stare of hers. Looks like a hang-over, doesn't it, Kairns, when she poses like that? But never mind, she did it five minutes ago and mumbled something about the psychic gift being on her. I hate people who mumble; and as for the psychic gift . . . as I said before, my grandmother's tom-cat . . . ! She said the gift was on her, that it was leading her to the spot where the revolver lay. Ass ! Doesn't she know the revolver was found long ago ? I'll see what she does."

Dr. Dunmore's red whiskers began to point again, like the nose of a hound scenting the wind. Then he left them hurriedly; and as Kairns and Mulvaney watched, he tramped hurriedly across The Briars grounds in the direction of the feminine figure.

"What do you make of that one?" Kairns asked; and Mulvaney waited for a few moments before answering.

"So far as I can figure it out, Miss Spencer seems to think Dr. Dunmore committed the murder," Mulvaney replied at length. "Faking, or otherwise, she has picked on his sports coat; and now it begins to look as though she had started to bring a little pressure to bear. Psychic stuff, I suppose you could call it. If Dunmore did commit the murder, for some motive which we have not discovered, and if Daisy Spencer did see him go through the billiard-room doorway shortly before the murder, I would say she has now reached the practical stage of blackmail."

Kairns agreed, and followed with the suggestion that it might be well to attempt to trace the movements of Jasper Kingdon during his early morning dash. But they paused for a few moments to watch the moving scene.

Daisy Spencer disappeared beyond the fringe of woods. Dr. Dunmore walked briskly across the broad lawn; then he paused abruptly, as though some new thought had reached him. He seemed to be staring at the spot which Daisy Spencer had so recently occupied, and for a time it was obvious that he was at a loss to decide upon his course of action. He glanced swiftly about him, then moved on, slowly, almost indifferently, in the general direction of the woods, but not in a straight line.

As Kairns and Mulvaney stepped into the latter's car, Dr. Dunmore appeared to be wandering vaguely in the general direction taken by Daisy Spencer.

"Lost some of his enthusiasm, I fancy," Mulvaney decided; and when they reached the gateway to The Briars they were stopped by Tubby Sangster. The latter had lost some of his listlessness. His eyes, being slightly serious for the first time since they met him, appeared somewhat out of place in the chubby face.

"You'll excuse me," he said, with surprising briskness, "but I want to thank you again for tipping me off about those cigarette-stubs. Do you mind if I ask a couple of questions?"

"There is no law against it," Kairns returned, and Sangster attempted a smile. It was not an entire success.

"You had me a bit hipped this morning when you told me about it," he went on. "And perhaps I didn't thank you rightly. And now, do you mind telling me how many stubs there were?"

"Two," Kairns informed him.

"With other stubs on the ash-tray?"

Kairns agreed.

"Perhaps that's enough for the meantime, and I don't object to telling you," Sangster went on, "that it has me stirred up, though I don't often get that way."

"Stirred up?" Kairns seemed surprised. "May I ask why?"

"Why?" It was Sangster's turn to appear astonished. "But I guess you're not sitting in my place. If you were,

you would have an idea how it feels to find somebody else trying to push a murder off on your shoulders. It has me roiled, and I don't mind saying so, and maybe that's where the murderer made a mistake."

Kairns did not attempt to answer; for it was strange to see Tubby Sangster in a serious mood.

"Two of my cigarette-stubs," Sangster went on, "I mean two stubs from my cigarettes, on the ash-tray, on the table where Hamstead was murdered. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kairns granted.

"And that's all I want to know, now." Tubby Sangster stared down the roadway, then changed the topic abruptly. "I wonder what that silly woman is up to," he added.

"What silly woman?" Kairns asked, as though there could be many.

Sangster seemed to like that, for he shook his head slowly and some of his old indifference crept back into his manner.

"Spencer, of course," he returned. "You've just told me something of use to me, so I don't mind trading. What do you suppose she tried to pull on me a half hour ago? But you couldn't guess. She sort of sidled up to me, stuck that doll face of hers close to my nose and whispered that I would look charming in Dr. Dunmore's sports coat. Get that, Mr. Kairns?"

Probably Kairns did grasp the point; but he waited for an explanation.

"Don't look puzzled," Sangster became slightly bantering. "Oh, well, perhaps we'd better not put it into words."

"Possibly not," Kairns admitted. "But surely Dr. Dunmore would know if anybody else had his coat during . . . shall we say . . . during a most critical period?"

"I see you grasp the point, but the devilish queer part of it is that Dunmore wouldn't need to know a thing about it, if it really happened that way."

"I suppose he is the sort who would leave his coats lying all over the place," Kairns encouraged.

"Not exactly that," Sangster explained. "But perhaps

you are overlooking the fact that The Briars is a bit ancient in design. In other words, it was put up before people realized the necessity for clothes-closets. The bedrooms are rather short on that, so Mrs. Madden had a couple of community clothes-closets put in on each floor when she took over the place. So you see? But of course you do. Well, thanks again, a lot."

Sangster left in the direction of The Briars, and Captain Mulvaney drove thoughtfully and slowly towards the village.

"In that event," Kairns observed a few moments later, "almost any person at The Briars could have had access to Dr. Dunmore's ochre coat, as Daisy Spencer calls it. But what do you make of the Spencer woman, Mul?"

Mulvaney drove another block before answering.

"I would say," he decided, "that I haven't greatly changed my mind about her. I feel now that possibly she did see the murderer enter the billiard-room that night, but not knowing there was a murder coming, and probably being some distance away, she scarcely gave it a thought at the time other than to feel it was Dr. Dunmore, because she believed she saw Dr. Dunmore's sports coat. Then later, after the murder was noised about, she began to realize the importance of what she had seen, but upon which she was not very clear in her mind. She saw it was a remarkably fine opportunity to blackmail somebody, but wasn't positive where she should start. So she sent out a blanket warning to everybody at The Briars that she might spring something. When that did not produce results, she tried to narrow matters by centering on Dr. Dunmore. Apparently he wasn't being blackmailed; so she tried another tack. She swung on Tubby Sangster. But whether she has gone farther than that, I don't know; though it does seem to ease Dr. Dunmore out of it, if he wouldn't be blackmailed. How does it strike you, Amor?"

"Fine, except on one point. If you noticed that particular red sheen in Dr. Dunmore's whiskers, you would hardly say it eased him out of affairs because he declined to be

blackmailed. I imagine he is the sort who would fight back, perhaps violently."

They had reached the village. Their arrival was welcome to at least one of the natives, for Mamie Fargo flagged them in front of the post-office. She seemed somewhat disappointed.

"I haven't been able to learn a thing," she complained, "and I don't think they are trying to keep anything from me. Nobody seems to know a thing about any of The Briars folks going out to Ridgeport or any place like that since they came. I mean, except Mr. Kingdon this morning."

Kairns sympathized with her efforts.

"But the theory is right," Miss Fargo brightened. "If somebody didn't bring a revolver and silencer with him, they just had to go out and get one. . . . But there's another thing Aunt Sarah Jane doesn't understand."

Kairns remained politely silent.

"It's about that queer Honduras message which came to Mr. Kingdon after he got back from Ridgeport this forenoon," she explained. "Aunt Sarah Jane could understand the rest of the message. But that Honduras part of it! It is puzzling, isn't it, Mr. Kairns?"

The latter considered for a moment.

"You have been so extremely helpful, Miss Fargo," he replied at length, "that I don't mind telling you something in confidence. Strict confidence. It may help keep Aunt Sarah Jane's mind off her rheumatism."

Then he gave her a brief sketch of the proposed expedition, without suggesting the motive. Mamie Fargo's eyes widened. They grew so wide that it seemed they were about to perform the impossible; then suddenly Mamie Fargo laughed softly, so softly and appreciatively that Mulvaney laughed loudly.

"Young man," she rebuked, "this is no laughing matter. But I won't forget it, Mr. Kairns, I won't forget it."

Then she turned and literally fled down the main street.

"I fancy," Kairns observed, "that the only thing she will forget is that it was told to her in strict confidence."

Mulvaney was still inclined to laugh,

CHAPTER XXII

KAIRNS and Mulvaney had an early luncheon, through a portion of which Mrs. Baxter was unusually attentive. Between the intervals when she served as waitress, she occupied a chair opposite Mulvaney, and her interest was almost equally divided between Jasper Kingdon's flying visit to Ridgeport and Aunt Sarah Jane's latest theory.

"Of course," she observed, as she removed the empty soup plates, "Aunt Sarah Jane is unusually clever. She has ample time for reflection, and I have discovered that she has a very good understanding of human nature. So when she feels that some person made a trip out to Ridgeport, or some other place, to get a silencer, I know she has given the point much thought. Yet we have not been able to learn that any of the guests, or even any of the occupants of The Briars, made such a trip since the party gathered; and I feel we have covered the ground rather well. And that brings up the point . . ."

Mrs. Baxter departed for the next course.

". . . the point," she added upon her return, as though the sentence had never been broken, "that if no person went out for a silencer, there must have been one at The Briars all the time. I mean, one of the guests must have brought it, or one of the members of the household had it. And that would be strange, in either case, would it not, Mr. Cairns?"

Mrs. Baxter had forgotten the salad-dressing. She remained absent from the dining-room much longer than such a trifling duty would require.

"I thought I heard the telephone ring"; Mulvaney sought an explanation.

When Mrs. Baxter returned, without either the salad or the dressing, her eyes were almost brilliant.

"Oh," she said rebukingly, "why didn't you tell *me*?"

"About the salad?" Mulvaney countered.

"No." Mrs. Baxter's voice was almost sharp; it was at least accusing. "That was Miss Fargo on the telephone."

"I thought I heard it ring," Mulvaney returned vaguely. "But I understood, Mrs. Baxter, that you went to the kitchen for the salad-dressing."

"Salad-dressing?" Mrs. Baxter returned, as though her mind were groping with the unknown. "Oh yes, the salad-dressing; where is it? So that was Mamie Fargo on the telephone. And you told *her* about that expedition to Honduras. I'll have to think."

Mrs. Baxter departed and returned a moment later with some sardines.

"Now where did that come from?" she demanded, as she deposited the plate before Mulvaney. "You can never trust these village girls any more. I didn't say a thing to her about sardines."

"Salad-dressing," Mulvaney prompted, but Mrs. Baxter no longer qualified as a capable waitress.

"Of course, I think I see how it happened." Mrs. Baxter's voice had lost its asperity. "I remember Mamie told me she pressed you on the point because Aunt Sarah Jane didn't understand that wire to Mr. Kingdon. It mentioned Honduras; and to think . . . Goodness, what that woman will do for the sake of publicity!"

"You mean Aunt Sarah Jane?" Mulvaney asked, with a show of innocence.

"Don't be silly. . . . Oh, I beg your pardon. No, I meant Mrs. Ashley Madden."

"You puzzle me, Mrs. Baxter. There must be some mistake. We didn't mention a thing to Miss Fargo about publicity. Mr. Cairns merely told her, to help ease Aunt Sarah Jane's rheumatism, about the expedition to Honduras. There was no mention of publicity. Why, it hasn't had any."

Mrs. Baxter stared at Mulvaney for a time. Then she

picked up a pitcher and began to pour some cream on the sardines.

"Oh!" she exclaimed a moment later. "That is your fault, Captain Mulvaney. I'll get the salad."

The proprietress of the Orient Hotel departed, clearly not her accustomed self. She did not return with the salad. Instead, there was another tingling sound, as though the telephone were again in operation, and shortly the kitchen girl appeared with the dessert.

"No salad?" Mulvaney asked.

"Huh!" said the girl, and it was plain that one ear was tuned in the direction of the telephone.

Mrs. Baxter did not reappear. The girl brought coffee and poured it so hastily that the tablecloth suffered. Then she retreated and Kairns and Mulvaney completed the meal in peace.

"I think I detect a little method in your madness," the Captain remarked, as they reached the street again. "There is nothing quite like an army of workers."

"I would say willing workers," Kairns amended.

They visited the police station, but Chief Thompson had not yet recovered from his all-night vigil in the vicinity of The Briars.

"And the village seems deserted without Deacon Jones," Mulvaney suggested. "Well, the next move, I suppose, is to attempt to check that wire to Kingdon . . . and why it came."

Kairns agreed.

"The wire to Kingdon was undoubtedly in reply to a wire which Kingdon sent when he made that flying trip early in the morning," Kairns suggested. "When you consider the nature of the wire to Kingdon, you must realize that it doesn't contain a single thing which could not have been said over the telephone in a very few seconds, and doubtless much more effectively. So the logical inference is that Kingdon did not use the long-distance to New York this morning. Instead, he sent a wire from somewhere, and if we can learn its nature, we may at least

have a more accurate glimpse into Jasper Kingdon's mind."

"It's a big world," Mulvaney replied. "There are a good many points from which Kingdon might have wired."

"Are there?" Kairns returned. "On the contrary, when you consider the hour at which Kingdon's wire must have been sent, there are very few points from which it could have been sent. But first of all, the return wire to Kingdon came through Royalston. There is a bare chance that he wired from there, though I doubt it greatly. But I suggest that we could use the afternoon to worse advantage than by running over to Royalston, as a precaution, and then on to Ridgeport. We could get a line on Fricker's progress and save him calling through the Burleigh switchboard and shouting his information to the world."

They drove over to Royalston, but it was evident almost from the first glimpse of the telegraph office that Kingdon had not made use of it early in the morning.

"Just a branch," Kairns decided. "I'll wager it doesn't handle a half-dozen wires a day; so it wasn't open this morning at the time Kingdon made his frantic drive."

The clerk distinctly remembered the message to Kingdon. In fact, it was one of only two handled so far during the day. As for the possibility of Kingdon having wired early in the morning, it was quite out of the question.

"The office wasn't open until after nine," he explained; and by that time Jasper Kingdon had returned to Burleigh.

Mulvaney drove on in the direction of Ridgeport.

"I think, Captain," Kairns remarked some time later, "we should be thankful for the hour of Kingdon's mad dash. It should simplify matters greatly. Without wishing to cast the slightest reflection on your native Ridgeport, Mul, it isn't the size of city which keeps branch telegraph offices open all night. And if we time Kingdon's dash, I think we can arrive at an approximate period when he must have wired New York."

"Neat," Mulvaney agreed. "Now, let me see: I'll work that out myself. Kingdon was back in Burleigh shortly before nine. He left Burleigh about six-thirty.

Fifty miles to Ridgeport and fifty miles back. So he probably spent a few minutes in Ridgeport around seven forty-five. You're right, Amor; there wouldn't be a single branch telegraph office open at that hour. And it's the Western Union head office he must have used. They stay open all night. Of course he could have used the office at the Union Station, but that would be an extra half-mile drive in either direction, and I doubt if Kingdon was wasting any mileage this morning. We'll try that office anyway, and I'll stop at the next town and telephone through to headquarters. They can have the red tape cleaned up for us by the time we get in."

When they reached Ridgeport, Mulvaney drove directly to the Western Union head office. Apparently the red tape had been cleared away most efficiently, for the manager, a Mr. Barton, was prepared for the call.

"Of course," Barton observed with a smile, "it is a trifle irregular, but I believe I appreciate the situation. At least, your office said you were coming through from Burleigh. And the newspapers are not entirely silent."

Barton was an alert executive. He had anticipated one of Mulvaney's first requests. For, after the preliminaries, he pulled a sheaf of telegrams from his desk.

"Since your headquarters suggested it was of considerable importance," he explained, "I have been in touch with the station office, and I already have here copies of all messages which passed between Burleigh and New York from midnight up to noon. Your office was not specific as to the hour which interested you."

Mulvaney explained the situation in some detail, and Barton's smile brightened.

"You simplify matters immensely," he said. "Pardon me a moment while I check the wires."

Barton was occupied for five minutes or so.

"Taking the extreme range of time in which you could be interested," he returned, as he held a few slips in his hand, "it must have been from seven-fifteen this morning

until eight-thirty. It would be impossible, I take it, for your gentleman to have covered the distance in less than that time."

Mulvaney agreed.

"Then," Barton added, "that narrows the list down to seven telegrams which were sent from Ridgeport to New York. I think it is hardly fair to our customers to permit you to look at all seven messages, so if you could let me have the name of the sender . . ."

"Jasper Kingdon," Mulvaney informed, and Barton studied the messages once more. Finally he shook his head.

"The name does not appear," he replied. "No, I can be positive of that. But this may interest you. One of the messages does not bear a name at all. It is the only one open to doubt, so possibly we may assume it is the message in question. At least, we are not betraying our customers by permitting you to look at it."

Barton handed it over. Mulvaney inspected it for a time, then handed it to Kairns. This is what the latter read :

Simon Alvarez . . . New York City. See letter yesterday's date from Burleigh. Situation intensely critical. Rush answer.

As Barton had indicated, it was unsigned.

"But there isn't the slightest doubt of it," Kairns decided. "Thank you, Mr. Barton. Now if you will permit the Captain to copy the contents."

There was, as Kairns had suggested, no doubt as to the identity of the sender of the unsigned message.

"And there does not appear to be any doubt," Kairns added, when they were on the street once more, "that Kingdon's message to Alvarez had something to do with the situation at The Briars. You will naturally have to get the co-operation of the New York police in locating Simon Alvarez. Rather a pity, Mul, that we hadn't the time to drop down there ourselves ; but somehow I have

the strange feeling that we should not be long absent from Burleigh."

"I'll arrange for the office to look after it," Mulvaney assured him. "But when we look at that message and think of the answer which came back to Kingdon, it gives me an idea. I mean, it points."

"Precisely," Kairns granted. "Facts and incidents always point, if one can discover the direction. In this angle of the Burleigh situation the latest developments most assuredly point in a given direction. For, as you say, when we consider the wire to Alvarez in relation to the Alvarez reply to Kingdon, it forces us most positively to look at Honduras. And if one looks at Honduras intensely, one definite figure emerges from the background. All this, of course, may be merely surface reasoning, Captain, and it is so primary and direct that one is disposed to doubt its accuracy. But at the moment do you see other than one definite figure emerging from the Honduras background?"

"I don't," Mulvaney declared positively. "Though I must admit that, up to the present, I hadn't thought much about Augustini. Somehow, he doesn't seem to have much colour. I don't mean physically; for he has enough of it that way. But he just hasn't been pushed at us by events. I suppose that is the way to put it."

"Almost self-effacing," Kairns added. "But possibly there are two points we should remember, and doubtless both are extremely important if we could read them correctly. You probably recall that while both Mrs. Madden and Jessie Burn were certain Kingdon did a little gambling, they merely suspected that Augustini did the same. That suggests a character not entirely legible from the surface. Again, if you will look at your list of fingerprints which Fricker located in the billiard-room, you will find some of Augustini's. And, I wonder . . ."

Kairns paused with a suggestion of drama in his manner.

"And some of Kingdon's as well," Mulvaney reminded.

"Yes, yes, of course." Kairns' voice had become

slightly distant. "But, Mul, where were those respective prints? That, I fancy, may become an abnormally important factor. I fancy, Mul . . . finger-prints can be curious objects of evidence. Yes, Mul, we must consider the significance of that . . . Kingdon's prints on a decanter of rye, and Augustini's on the french window. . . . And that, coupled with these messages to and from New York . . .?"

Kairns did not complete the sentence. He had, apparently, become engrossed in thought which brought a sparkle to his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON the way to headquarters, Mulvaney insisted upon labouring with the Kingdon-Honduras phase of the problem. As he sketched it, Kingdon had obviously written to Simon Alvarez from Burleigh on the previous day, and that must have been after the murder. He had asked for information, for advice, or possibly for definite instructions; but, since the writing of the letter, the situation had become so "intensely critical" that he felt impelled to make a frantic trip to Ridgeport and press for an answer.

"That could involve either Kingdon or Augustini," Mulvaney considered; "and if it doesn't involve Kingdon, we assuredly know he is vitally interested. I would like to know how matters became intensely critical yesterday, hours after the murder."

"There is one way," Kairns suggested. "I think we may assume that Kingdon's letter to Alvarez was written fairly early in the day. It must have caught the noon mail, or why would he have the slightest reason to believe Alvarez had received the letter in New York early this morning? One incident after that could be vital. Fricker finger-printed the people at The Briars around six in the evening."

"Oh!" said Mulvaney. "I thought those prints would pull action sooner or later; and I wonder if this is it? But that would leave a deuced queer situation, wouldn't it?"

"Decidedly queer. If Kingdon is afraid of his prints, one would fancy that any advice or information from Alvarez on the point would be useless. Those prints either betray Kingdon, or they do not; and Kingdon is the one person in the world who can answer that question

positively at this moment. He knows he is betrayed, or he knows he has nothing to fear from his prints. But he dashed to Ridgeport, and he dashed back again, and how could that have accomplished anything in the way of throwing any person off the trail of his prints? Curious, Mulvaney, I must admit. No, I am inclined to go back to the Alvarez wire to Kingdon later in the day and consider its wording with extreme care. You recall the words: 'Will check Honduras. Am working through Washington. But must have time.' So we cannot escape the point that Honduras is intimately involved, and Leander Augustini comes from Honduras. And Augustini's finger-prints were found on the french window. You must not overlook that, Mul. Mind you, on the french window, and not on the rum-glass. But here we are at headquarters."

They located Fricker with only a few minutes' delay. He had apparently gone through a busy period; for his hair was tousled and he had overlooked other minor points which indicated that the personal had not recently entered his considerations.

"No," he replied to Mulvaney's first question, "we haven't got anywhere yet with the prints. I sent one set to Washington, with a letter explaining the urgency of the case, and I caught the first air mail. The second set is now in the hands of our finger-print department; but I called there not ten minutes ago and they haven't located anything yet. They have dropped everything else and are going at it head-first, you might say."

Fricker had made greater progress with the Sangster cigarettes and the stubs.

"I got Professor Kayo out at the Raymore Tobacco plant to look them over," he informed. "And Kayo 'phoned back not more than a half hour ago to say there was no doubt about the matter at all. The Sangster brand is quite an ordinary cigarette, dolled up with his private papers, and Kayo says the stubs and the cigarette which I gave him are the same brand. Not the slightest doubt of it. And he is an expert in such matters."

"So there is no questioning the fact that stubs from Sangster's cigarettes were found on the ash-tray of the murder-table," Cairns considered. "Fact of the matter is, Mul, it would have been decidedly disconcerting if there had been any question on the point. It would, somehow or other, have thrown the whole picture in the billiard-room out of focus if those stubs had chanced to belong to some other person with an initial S and with a queer taste for privately stamped papers. It just wouldn't have fitted the general pattern which is emerging, Mulvaney; and yet it would be interesting to know if Phipps hoped, when he handed us the cigarette, that it would not match the stubs . . ."

"Phipps?" Fricker became quite undignified. He actually laughed, though that may have been a natural reaction from the speed with which he had been working for hours. "Phipps," he repeated, though in different tone. "Why didn't we come to that before? If you will excuse me for saying so, I have Phipps' number. No doubt of it; not the slightest."

Mulvaney was inclined to be irritated.

"Then why don't you tell us?" he demanded.

"Phipps . . ." Fricker began; then he paused abruptly. "No," he decided, "I might get something wrong. It isn't for me to tell it; but I got in touch with your Theodore Massey, as you instructed, and Mr. Massey put Phipps in a very definite spot. You'll excuse me."

Fricker reached for the telephone. He reported a few moments later that Theodore Massey was in his office and would be glad to see them.

"So it was really Phipps who wrote the letter last night to Massey?" Mulvaney asked on the way to Massey's office.

"Absolutely," Fricker replied briefly.

"And since the handwriting on the two envelopes was the same," Mulvaney continued, "it means that Phipps actually signed Benito's name to that note to Cairns. Strange beggar, Phipps."

"Absolutely," Fricker repeated; and again Mulvaney was disposed to irritation.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself, Fricker," he almost snapped. "But if you have put your finger on a good point, I suppose you must have your own way."

"It is a good point," Fricker agreed. "Devilish good, if you ask me; and I'm just holding off for fear of messing it up."

The Theodore Massey office was barely a half-dozen blocks from headquarters. It was so close that Mulvaney wondered why he had never heard of the name before; though that, possibly, was due to the fact that the office was on the top flat of a ten-storey building, that it was at the rear of the structure, and that the entrance was so lacking in acclaim that the glass section of the door merely bore the number of the room and the two plain words, "Theodore Massey".

The ten-storey building was modern in every respect; so was the interior of Theodore Massey's office, except that there was no suggestion of the ornate. It was not quite luxurious, though it threatened the border-line. There were apparently few workers. For, upon the arrival of Mulvaney's party, the only visible person was a girl at a mahogany desk opposite the switchboard. Evidently she recognized Fricker and had her instructions.

"Mr. Massey is waiting," she informed him, as she opened a connecting door.

Theodore Massey was almost a surprise. He was a tall, gaunt man with penetrating eyes. Just now they seemed to be slightly amused. Then suddenly they swept into gravity.

Fricker performed the introductions, and Kairns glanced swiftly about, in search for some betrayal of Massey's place in the scheme of things. But there was no betrayal. Massey detected the hurried survey, and its lack of success seemed to touch his vanity. He was, evidently, fond of stagery.

"Permit me," he said. "My card."

Queerly enough, he extended it to Cairns rather than to Mulvaney.

Cairns read it, then handed it to Mulvaney. It bore the words :

THEODORE MASSEY

PRIVATE INQUIRY AGENT

"Private Inquiry Agent?" Mulvaney said. "You mean Private Detective Agency?"

"Some would call it that, though it is merely a matter of terminology."

Mulvaney considered for a moment.

"A letter was posted to you last night from Burleigh, by Phipps, butler at The Briars. You doubtless know the situation at Burleigh?"

"I could hope to know more."

"But you know Phipps?"

"Most assuredly, since he is one of my operatives."

Theodore Massey seemed to enjoy that. Mulvaney was slightly disturbed for a time, for he glanced uncertainly at Cairns as though at a loss how to proceed.

"You had, of course, fancied that Phipps was somehow associated with the murder." Massey still appeared to enjoy the situation. "So he is; but not as you fancied."

"And that girl Lucy Jupp?" Mulvaney asked.

"Another of my operatives. And, for that matter, so was Roger Hamstead."

"Well," said Mulvaney, "I'll be damned!"

"That is grasping time by the forelock," Massey replied. "But you must pardon us for not making the situation clear to you at the first. We had no thought of working independently of the police, but it was impossible for Phipps to get in touch with me earlier than he did. I was out of the city yesterday; besides, he has explained in his letter that conditions make it out of the question to risk a telephone call. There is, I fear, a rather desperate situation at The Briars, and having lost one man, we do not

care to lose more. Phipps was thrust suddenly into an abnormal situation which compelled him to exercise his judgment, and I fancy he has made a good job of it. But poor Frank! It is too bad—much too bad!”

“So you knew Hamstead as Frank Ashley?”

“Of course. Ashley has been with me for some time, almost ever since he was divorced by Mrs. Madden. It was circumstances, and not choice, which forced him into the Burleigh affair; so we considered the matter and decided there was only one thing for him to do . . . to take another name. Poor Ashley!”

Massey's lean face became grim.

“You will naturally understand,” he added, “how, with Ashley murdered, Phipps had no thought of leaving Burleigh. With that murder, his duties became two-fold. Besides, he liked Ashley. He chose to stay at The Briars; and I am certain from his letter that he would have resented any suggestion to the contrary; but, knowing something of the calibre of the criminal we are pitted against, he has not taken any chances. I think you gentlemen will agree with me that Phipps has handled himself remarkably well.”

“I wouldn't think of disputing that point,” Mulvaney returned, “but you seem to have a distinct advantage of us in many respects. Just what are we—and you—up against at The Briars?”

“One of the most clever jewel thieves it has ever been my lot to be pitted against.” Massey's thin lips seemed to grow thinner. “A thoroughly dangerous and desperate criminal, a man who has at least one murder to his credit. . . . I mean before this affair . . . and who apparently will stop at nothing. The unfortunate part of it is that he undoubtedly has brains, and that, in a real criminal, creates a critical situation.”

Massey fell silent. He did not look like a man given to emotion, yet it was apparent he was having some slight difficulty in exercising control. For a time he pondered the blank wall above Mulvaney's head; then suddenly his

glance swept back upon them and his eyes were bright with action.

"You want the story, of course," he said in a wholly business-like tone. "That is why you came. All right; then after that we can decide what to do. Very well, the individual we are after is Cracksman X."

"Good heavens!" said Mulvaney.

"Exactly," Massey returned. "I thought you would. There isn't even a reasonable margin to doubt that he is Cracksman X. I mean, not after the Ashley murder. Before that, yes, we were uncertain. But I see you know of Cracksman X."

"In a way," Mulvaney returned. "The name of course, sticks out. We had plenty of directions from both New York and Washington about a year ago to be on the watch for him, and the name is still on our books; but the deuce of it, Massey, is that there never was anything even approaching a decent description of the man. But what do you know about him, and where do you come into it?"

"Where do I come into it?" Massey considered. "Perhaps I should answer that question first. You recall that Del Monte jewel robbery at Rochester? Of course you do; for that was the last public appearance of Cracksman X. But I doubt if you know the inside story and the way a murder was hooked up with the robbery. You don't know unless you are in close contact with certain police officials in Washington and New York, for the details didn't get into the newspapers. But you must know the general tactics adopted by Cracksman X."

Mulvaney nodded.

"Picks on a set of jewels," he said, "and camps on their trail for months; then, when the time comes, he strikes."

"And—don't overlook this—he worms his way into the confidence of some person in close contact with the household. That was the way he did it in the Del Monte case. Sometimes he uses them in their innocence; sometimes he makes them confederates. In the Del Monte affair he used Dunkin, the chauffeur, as a confederate."

"Murdered, later!" said Mulvaney, and Massey nodded so sharply that his keen eyes seemed to flash.

"And I will wager, though I could not prove it, that Dunkin is not the first confederate who has gone that way. But how did I come into it? Through the insurance houses, of course. I am in their employ, giving my full time to their interests, working independently of the police. You understand? We almost had Cracksman X in that Del Monte business. Suspicion turned upon Dunkin almost from the first. The arrest would have been made in another twenty-four hours. But . . . Cracksman X silenced the man forever. He is a dangerous individual, but somehow he lacks the low mentality which generally goes with such people. . . . No, that is not quite what I mean, but you understand?"

Massey paused and glanced at Kairns.

"You are wondering, I suppose, how all this brings us to The Briars," he added. "It is quite simple. Cracksman X silenced Dunkin forever. It happened in the Del Monte car at night, but Cracksman X forgot to look in Dunkin's pockets. If he had looked, he would have found sketches of three other houses. So you see, Dunkin had become a useful confederate. Possibly he was more capable than others. At any rate, they had designs on three other houses, waiting, perhaps, for whichever should present the most favourable opportunity. But when the pressure came and Dunkin seemed in danger of arrest, he became a menace to Cracksman X and he was snuffed out, that was all. And that is where I come into it. One of the three houses in the sketches was The Briars at Burleigh. The insurance companies spread the three houses among three private inquiry agencies. The Briars fell to me."

Massey pulled a letter from a drawer and read two or three pages.

"Phipps informs me," he went on, "that he hasn't any idea how Ashley betrayed his hand, and he seems rather anxious about the point for fear he may make the same error. But I think I understand. We made a basic error.

It was all right to plant Phipps and Lucy Jupp at The Briars; but it was a mistake to put Ashley on the job, though obviously there had to be some person on the outside in close contact with Phipps. Phipps' movements at The Briars were restricted; but Ashley should never have been sent. He worked on that Del Monte case; but Phipps did not, neither did Lucy Jupp. It is plain now. Cracksman X must have been watching our actions in the Del Monte case, and he recognized Ashley. That must be it."

"In that event," Kairns suggested, "your Cracksman X must have a tremendous conceit."

"How so?" Massey asked.

"Assuming that you are right, and that he merely recognized Frank Ashley, he must have known that he was in no immediate danger; so his most logical move would have been to withdraw from The Briars. But by murdering Ashley he has left himself in a tight corner, the tightest, I fancy, that he has ever been in."

Massey seemed slightly disturbed by the observation.

"Confound it all, Kairns," he returned, "I have been trying to keep my mind off the possibility that the Ashley murder could have been committed by some person other than Cracksman X. There is only one chance I see, and that is the firebrand, Horace Madden. . . . It could have been that . . . But no . . . I simply must insist on Cracksman X. His conceit, I imagine, is great enough for that. For you must remember he has had a long run of victories over the police and everybody else concerned. That sort of thing would doubtless go to the head of a clever lunatic like Cracksman X. Even the greatest and most successful criminal has his weak spots and that is one of Cracksman X's. He believes he is invulnerable; beside, he may be the sort who delights in risks."

Massey returned deliberately to the letter.

"I see," he added, "one point has been well taken. Phipps tells me that you had The Briars guarded last night, apparently, he suggests, in the expectation that the criminal

would make a break for freedom. He says you were evidently counting on the effects of the finger-printing. But it is clear now, since Cracksman X was never in custody, that he has no occasion to fear finger-prints."

"And yet," Kairns returned, "the time must come, sooner or later, when he will no longer have the nerve to brazen it out at The Briars. I can understand how Cracksman X committed the technical error of not leaving The Briars quietly when he recognized Ashley . . . if that is what caused the murder . . . and how he might believe himself capable of outwitting the police indefinitely; for they are rather fond of their liquors up there. But in time, through silent pressure, he must weaken. From one angle, all we need to do is to keep a guard on the lookout, but that would never provide us with the essential evidence."

Massey again returned to his reading.

"It is peculiar," he observed, some time later, "but Phipps seems to have entertained the same thought as yourself, though it had not reached the stage of conviction at the time he wrote. He suggests there are points in the case which make it necessary to consider Horace Madden as a possibility. Jealousy. And I see Madden caught Ashley on the grounds and ordered him off the place. But the dashed idiot! If he did it, even in a fit of jealousy, why did he leave his revolver where it could be found so readily? It was his revolver which fired the shot, I suppose?"

Fricker provided the answer.

"The ballistic department has checked it," he replied. "There is no doubt of the weapon. It is an old type, with distinct marking on the bore. The bullet found in Frank Ashley's brain was fired from Madden's revolver."

Massey appeared dissatisfied.

"The work of a madman," he said, "if Madden did it."

Kairns studied Massey for some minutes while he continued to re-read Phipps' letter.

"You have," he suggested, when Massey glanced up

again, "an idea of your own as to the identity of Cracksman X?"

"Certainly I have," Massey declared crisply, "and it is based almost entirely on his habits in other cases. I have a most positive idea of my own. Cracksman X, as I have told you, works slowly and methodically. He seems to have the patience of time. He inserts himself into the good graces of individuals or households, then, when the time is ripe . . . off comes his strike. And of the whole lot of people at The Briars, there is only one who has inserted himself into the household according to the well-established traditions of Cracksman X."

Theodore Massey nodded with conviction; and he tossed Phipps' letter back in the drawer and closed the desk with a bang.

"And the one person who has faithfully followed the old patterns of Cracksman X," he added, just as convincingly, "is that man Sangster."

CHAPTER XXIV

MASSEY conceded that the Sangster cigarette-stubs created an anomaly, but he was still inclined to be firm in his convictions.

"Yes," he said, after the matter had received some attention, "I admit it does look ridiculous to think a man would commit a murder and brand himself plainly by leaving cigarette-stubs of that sort behind him; but it just goes to show the state of confusion he was in. And that backs up what you said a bit ago, Mr. Kairns, about the poor judgment Cracksman X used when he didn't walk calmly away from The Briars instead of murdering Ashley."

Massey consulted Phipps' letter once more.

"It is reasonably plain," he declared, "and the line of reasoning is sound. Phipps informs me that there were two stubs from Sangster's cigarettes on the ash-tray on the murder-table, and only one other stub. You see what that indicates? Sangster, or Cracksman X, was in such a state of excitement that he smoked twice as rapidly as Frank Ashley. So the murder was probably committed in the same state of excitement. He may not have intended murder when Ashley arrived; but something happened during that interview in the billiard-room. We may never know what it was, but it excited Cracksman X, and in a moment of ill-considered judgment he shot Ashley. That fits. And it explains that other difficult point in a logical manner; for it did seem queer that Cracksman X did not walk calmly away from the trouble instead of stepping into worse."

From one angle the reasoning seemed so sound that Kairns did not press the point, particularly as Mulvaney was disposed to lean in the same direction as Massey when

the latter repeated that Sangster was the only person at The Briars who had lived up strictly to the old tactics of Cracksman X.

"You gentlemen will be going back to Burleigh to-night?" Massey asked, a moment later when the Sangster point seemed dropped. "Yes. That is unfortunate; for I am anxious to get in touch with Phipps, and he informs me that the people at Burleigh are slightly peculiar, that it would be impossible to put through a long-distance call without the whole village knowing about it."

"And," Mulvaney added, with a grin, "with the whole village quoting your conversation, word for word, for the next few hours, and perhaps discussing the tone of your voice and the judgment you displayed."

Mulvaney talked for a few minutes and Massey listened. Then he laughed and reached for a pad.

"If you don't mind my suggestions," he said, after he finished his message to Phipps, "you will keep a keen eye on Sangster; though I know Phipps is already doing that. Well, the best of luck, and please keep me in touch. I can't go to Burleigh myself; you understand how that is out of the question, after working more prominently than Ashley on the Del Monte case."

Massey watched them from the doorway as though he begrudged them the excitement of the chase; but, as Cairns suggested, it was plain he had made a wise decision in refraining from a visit to Burleigh.

Fricker was put on the Simon Alvarez side of the case; and after he understood the situation as thoroughly as could be expected at the moment it was left for him to decide whether or not he should make a hurried trip to New York to check on Jasper Kingdon's strange correspondent.

"There can't possibly be an answer on the finger-prints from Washington for twenty-four hours," Mulvaney decided, "and not then unless they run into a streak of luck. But in view of what Massey said about Cracksman X having avoided the police in the past, I doubt if they produce

anything. I wish, Amor, we had time to drop down to New York and look up Alvarez."

"Agreed," Kairns returned. "But, somehow or other, I am growing restless. I feel we should not be too long absent from Burleigh."

The afternoon was well advanced before they started the return trip, and Kairns remained silent most of the way. But when they were only a few miles from Burleigh he roused, and Mulvaney glanced at him expectantly.

"Yes, Captain," he answered the glance, "I think I know what is on your mind. It is that affair of Sangster and the cigarette-stubs, and Cracksman X's curious failure to avoid trouble when it would have been such a simple matter to excuse himself from The Briars for a day, and not return. But there is much logic in what Massey says, though possibly from an angle which he did not consider. Matters now look slightly different, when we consider them through the eyes of Cracksman X. We must remember, first of all, that he knew nothing of those sketches found in Dunkin's pocket. That is obvious, for if he knew about them at all, he must have known that they fell into the hands of the police; and in that event there would never have been an assault upon The Briars. A much more primitive individual than Cracksman X would be wise enough for that. So we must look at the situation as it must have appeared to Cracksman X. After the Del Monte affair he doubtless set a jagged trail for the police to follow, knowing he was wanted, not only for robberies, but for the Dunkin murder. Then at the end of his jagged trail, which he must have believed unreadable, he insinuated himself into the household at The Briars. Imagine his amazement when Frank Ashley showed up at Burleigh—Ashley, who had taken part in the search following the Del Monte business.

"Just put yourself in the position of Cracksman X for a moment, Captain. We know Ashley was there in the hope of identifying Cracksman X. But Cracksman X must have leaped instantly to the conclusion that he was

already identified. Otherwise, how would it have been possible for Ashley to follow his confusing trail and appear at Burleigh? So there are grounds for Massey's theory that Cracksman X, despite a reputation for cool and patient plotting, was suddenly thrown into a panic. If he formed the hurried conclusion that Ashley had identified him and followed him for months, he must have left . . . or rather, he *knew*, according to his type of reasoning, that it was his life or Ashley's. So he acted hastily. He murdered Ashley, not realizing until later that by committing the murder at such a comparatively isolated place he had thrown a net about himself. That, Captain, could account for many of the inconsistencies we have observed."

Mulvaney did not attempt to answer; and for another period there was silence.

"In that event," Kairns added a little later, "it would be reasonable to believe that, having had a few hours to consider matters more sanely, Cracksman X must have reached the decision that The Briars is far from a healthy spot for him."

"Meaning," said Mulvaney, "that you are expecting him to make a breakaway, and that is the reason you don't want to be long away from Burleigh?"

"Possibly," Kairns agreed. "But that, naturally, would be a most unsatisfactory way to solve any problem."

Though Mulvaney attempted to continue the conversation, Kairns fell back upon silence for the balance of the ride to Burleigh, and it was only when they were well into the village that he finally roused.

"Peculiar, is it not, Mulvaney?" he asked. "The pose of the citizens. Slightly unusual."

It was obvious almost from the first that the atmosphere was charged with some new element. It was, probably, as Kairns had suggested, the pose of the citizens, rather than the numbers. The latter was somewhat beyond normal. There were little clusters along the pavements, and the general attitude was that of heads which had been

thrust together. And as Mulvaney drove through to Wilkes' garage, they watched with curious intentness.

Mulvaney stopped in front of the garage; and Deacon Jones appeared, apparently from no definite spot. It was almost as though he had materialized from the atmosphere. But he was there, barring their way to the entrance, and the eager light of his eyes suggested that he had fully recovered from the strains of the all-night vigil.

Kairns glanced over a shoulder and became aware of the existence of Miss Mamie Fargo. She was bearing down upon them from across the main street; while Wilkes stepped briskly from the rear of the garage.

Deacon Jones won that particular race. Mamie Fargo was a full fifteen paces behind him, and Wilkes was a good third. The rest of Burleigh's population maintained a more respectful distance, though the curious way in which they stared in the direction of the little cluster in front of the garage suggested the unusual.

Deacon Jones, with eyes alight, glanced slowly at Mamie Fargo. Then he looked firmly at Amor Kairns, and lastly at Captain Mulvaney.

"This is no place to talk," he said in baleful tones. "There must be a meeting over this."

Then he looked at Wilkes.

"The Chief's office," said Wilkes, and Deacon Jones evidently agreed, though he begrudged Wilkes the credit for the suggestion.

"This way, gentlemen," he said, as he placed a slight emphasis on the last word and looked over Mamie Fargo's head.

Then he led the way across the street to Chief Thompson's office. The door was partly open, and the Chief's feet were once more resting peacefully on the edge of his desk. The sudden manner in which he greeted them carried its own suggestions, particularly as he blinked a trifle.

"That job last night . . ." Thompson began; but Deacon Jones silenced him with a gesture.

"This is a meeting," said Deacon Jones. "A meeting of the council."

Kairns, Mulvaney, and Wilkes followed him through the doorway. Mamie Fargo was about to do the same when he stepped forward and blocked the passage.

"Of the council," he repeated, as he closed the door in Miss Fargo's face and stood for a time scowling at its panels.

"The women," he said in tones which suggested that, mentally at least, he had used adjectives which had no part in the life of a deacon; then he turned about and faced Kairns and Mulvaney.

"This, gentlemen," he began in an official voice, "may, or may not, be a serious situation. But we have reason to believe they are worried up at The Briars."

The Deacon paused, so long and so dramatically that finally Mulvaney felt called upon to answer.

"Possibly they should be," he suggested. "I understand it is customary in the case of a murder."

"You do not understand," said the Deacon heavily. "This is a *new* cause for worry."

"I beg your pardon," said Mulvaney.

"I should hope you would," Deacon Jones forgave him with a scowl. "But as I remarked a moment ago, we have reason to believe they have fresh cause for concern. It came to us from Lizzie Murdock. The girl came down to her mother's this afternoon for a change of clothing, and she told us about it."

The Deacon was evidently fond of his drama, for he paused much longer than was required to clear his throat.

"The point is . . ." Wilkes inserted, but got no farther.

"The point," said the Deacon in louder tones, "is that they are worried because that woman did not appear for luncheon. Mrs. Madden is greatly concerned. Lizzie Murdock told us that, and the girl is truthful. You can depend on her word."

"What woman?" Mulvaney demanded so crisply that Deacon Jones appeared astonished.

"What woman?" he returned. "Didn't I tell you? That Spencer woman. What do they call her? Daisy Spencer. Yes, Miss Daisy Spencer failed to appear for luncheon. The house was searched. . . ."

"They didn't use that word," Wilkes inserted, and Deacon Jones scowled again.

"Then they went over The Briars carefully, from top to bottom, and looked over the grounds, but Miss Spencer was not located. So Mrs. Madden is worried. Horace Madden has been to the village twice this afternoon."

"Worried?" Mulvaney demanded.

"That is what I don't know," the Deacon replied. "He didn't say a word about Miss Spencer being absent—I mean missing. . . . He just stood around a few minutes each time and chatted as though nothing was on his mind. But he couldn't fool me."

"So he was worried?" Mulvaney insisted.

"If he wasn't, he should be. Lizzie Murdock is loyal to the village. What time is it now? Supper-time; we should all be at our suppers, and we would be, if it wasn't for this. But Lizzie Murdock is loyal. She just 'phoned . . . from the butler's pantry. . . . Yes, that's what they call it. From the butler's pantry, and told Mrs. Jones that Miss Spencer hadn't returned yet."

That, somehow, seemed to place Deacon Jones in the centre of things, and he realized the strategic nature of his position.

"Not returned yet," he repeated, with dramatic emphasis on each word.

Captain Mulvaney became uneasy. He glanced at Kairns, and the latter showed unusual concern.

"So it gets down to the point that no person at The Briars has seen Miss Spencer for hours?" Mulvaney asked.

"Nor any person in the village," Wilkes scored that one, somewhat to the Deacon's displeasure.

"That should have been taken for granted," Deacon Jones declared. "I feel, Mr. Wilkes, that these gentlemen are aware of the fact that if any person in the village had

seen Miss Spencer, the people at The Briars would have been informed long ago. . . .”

“But that isn’t all.” Wilkes showed signs of rebellion from the rule of Deacon Jones. “That Dr. Dunmore——”

“Excuse me, Mr. Wilkes,” the Deacon recovered his lost ground, “I feel I am capable of handling this situation.” Then, as he turned to Kairns, “Mr. Wilkes may be placing too much emphasis on the fact that Dr. Dunmore . . . that’s the red-whiskered gentleman—and a fierce-looking person I think he is—has also been absent since shortly before the lunch hour.”

“I didn’t say they had eloped,” Wilkes inserted, with some asperity. “That was your idea.”

“It was a frivolous remark, and should have been understood as such,” the Deacon returned coldly. “I can see I must be cautious how I speak when certain gentlemen are around me.”

“Besides, we know they didn’t go away together,” Wilkes insisted. “At least a half-dozen of us saw Dr. Dunmore drive through the village, and he was alone, though he was going faster than the law allows.”

“He could have picked her up outside the village.” Deacon Jones presented a remarkably active turn of front. “I can see, Mr. Wilkes, that you know very little about the possibilities——”

“Please,” Kairns interrupted, “just what is the situation?”

“The situation——” Wilkes began.

“The situation,” Deacon Jones raised his voice, “is simply that Miss Spencer has been absent since shortly before the lunch hour at The Briars and that Dr. Dunmore drove through the village about the same time, in that Mr. Kingdon’s car, and I may say that if Mrs. Madden wasn’t so useful to the village I would have insisted that Chief Thompson have him arrested for speeding within the limits. But under the circumstances the village must be lenient with Mrs. Madden’s guests. Now I am not one to say there was any connection whatever between Miss

Spencer's disappearance and Dr. Dunmore's absence, but there are folks here who are not so charitable. One should never be the first to judge his neighbour."

Deacon Jones looked beyond Wilkes' head.

"Well, you're judging me," Wilkes retorted.

Captain Mulvaney was looking at Amor Kairns with a fixed intentness. His eyes had become somewhat hectic; but he was, apparently, waiting for Kairns to act.

"You asked for it," Mulvaney said at length when Kairns did not speak.

"You really think so, Captain?" Kairns asked.

"There isn't a doubt in the world about it," Mulvaney returned. "And for my part, I know exactly where I am going to look for Miss Spencer. And if I don't find her, I'll be surprised."

Chief Thompson had reached the stage of rising and displaying interest.

"You know where she is?" he asked.

Mulvaney considered that for a time. Then he glanced uncertainly at Kairns.

"The situation, gentlemen, is this," Kairns replied: "Neither Captain Mulvaney nor myself knows where Miss Spencer has gone. But owing to certain incidents which developed while we were at The Briars this forenoon, we have reason to believe that we might suggest a possibility. You say Dr. Dunmore was driving rather rapidly through the village?"

"Too dashed fast," Wilkes returned. "I thought he acted like a crazy man. But you know why we didn't do anything. The Deacon has explained that."

"Yes," Kairns agreed. "The situation may be a trifle difficult. We do not wish to create a false impression, so we think this matter should be approached quietly—for the time being at least. But this forenoon as the Captain and I left The Briars grounds we saw Miss Spencer at the edge of the woods at the left of the house. You know the place?"

Deacon Jones stared for a moment.

"Good Lord !" he exclaimed. "I mean, I am . . . oh . . . excuse my hasty words."

"You understand," Kairns added, "I am not making any definite suggestion, other than to say it might not be a loss of effort if you gathered a few citizens quietly, you understand, without raising an alarm, and spent a little time going through that bit of the woods."

Deacon Jones had become quite sallow.

"You do it, Wilkes," he said hoarsely. "You're a member of the council."

"I'll do it," said Chief Thompson, with a sudden display of capacity.

The Chief stepped towards the door.

"Be discreet, above all things," Kairns advised. "Theory is not always supported by fact."

The Chief left. Wilkes joined him ; but Deacon Jones slumped into the official chair.

"I did think they had eloped," he said. "But this . . ."

He did not finish the sentence ; so Kairns and Mulvaney left him there, while they joined a small group of citizens whom Chief Thompson had already gathered. But, regardless of official intent, discretion seemed out of the question. The group swelled to double its numbers before they could find cars to transport them ; so when they moved away towards the woods at the edge of The Briars it was like a swiftly moving procession.

At least a score of men swept down upon the few acres of bush-land ; and under Chief Thompson's directions they began to beat the undergrowth in a rapid but methodical manner.

A half hour later they found all that was left of Daisy Spencer. The body lay under a cluster of old branches, in the heart of the woods, and the passing hand of death had wiped all traces of the baby stare from her distorted features. For she had been most efficiently throttled.

CHAPTER XXV

THE murderer of Daisy Spencer had left no doubt as to the manner of her death. He had been wholly indifferent about that. For there was an ugly weal across her forehead, and her strangled features told the rest, even without the cord knotted about her throat.

It was a heavy cord, possibly a quarter of an inch in thickness, of russet shade, with a glittering tassel at each end. Just now the tassels dangled grotesquely over the dead woman's shoulder.

The murder was so brutalizing that the villagers stepped back and left Chief Thompson with a clear field for action. Thompson appeared confused. He called for some of the men to help him remove the body; then Mulvaney stepped forward and suggested it would be more advisable for some person to get in touch with Dr. Thorley at once.

"A pure formality, I know," the Captain suggested, "but it is better to let the doctor make his first examination of the body in the position in which it was found."

"Of course it is"; the Chief grasped eagerly at the opening. "I'll get the doctor at once."

Chief Thompson hurried away. Several villagers followed; while others began to move restlessly about the undergrowth with their eyes upon the ground, as though searching for clues.

Kairns stepped to Mulvaney's side, and together they stood looking down upon all that was left of Daisy Spencer.

"A most ghastly affair, Captain," Kairns remarked. "You can see, from the broad setting, just how it must have been done. That bruise on the forehead suggests that the murderer approached the woman, struck her a violent blow, then strangled the life out of her with that cord. No sign of struggle whatever; so the blow must

have rendered her unconscious. A vicious scene, Mulvaney. Quite in keeping with what we have learned of the character of Cracksman X. Her life or his. Or so he believed. I fancy we can reconstruct at least a portion of the scene. . . ."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Amor, I have a lot to do," Mulvaney broke in. "We can go into those details later."

"It seems to be an undoubted fact, from what we personally have seen of Daisy Spencer"—Kairns did not appear to notice the interruption—"that she played a most unfortunate part in this grim affair at The Briars. I fancy you read her role quite accurately this forenoon, Captain. She actually detected the murderer of Frank Ashley when he passed through the billiard-room doorway, but did not realize at the time the seriousness of the situation, so could not be certain of his identity. So she used her psychic memory hoax on each member of the household until finally she came to the real murderer. And he, realizing the danger in which he stood——"

"As I said before, Amor," Mulvaney interrupted for the second time, "you'll have to excuse me. We can go into that some time later. Now, do you mind staying here and taking charge while I set my part of the machinery in motion?"

Kairns glanced at him curiously.

"Oh . . ." he said. "Yes, of course. Just what had you thought of doing, Captain?"

Mulvaney seemed irritated, though doubtless the grim product of the murderer's trade had played on his nerves.

"What do I think of doing?" he asked, a trifle sharply. "Good heavens, Amor, don't you see Dunmore already has hours the start of us? He must have. . . . Damn it all! . . . From shortly before luncheon until now. . . . Nearly seven hours; perhaps all of that. And driving like a lunatic, even through the village. If he didn't crack up Kingdon's car hours ago, he must have hit New York by this time. Not a doubt about it, if he headed in that direction; and that is where he would be most apt to go.

Murderers like big cities, and you should know that. It is so easy to lose themselves—for a time, anyway. But I'll have to get hold of Kingdon, get the car number and a general description; then I'll get on the long-distance and notify headquarters. They can get in touch with New York and send out the general alarm. Good heavens, Amor, think of the time we have lost!"

"Yes," Kairns returned coolly. "I have been thinking of that, and other things, ever since I caught my first glimpse of Daisy Spencer's dead body. If Mr. Dunmore actually headed for New York, he must have made it at least an hour ago, and has already found his first warren by this time; so a few more minutes can hardly matter. But what a fantastic picture that creates! I am disappointed, Mulvaney, frankly disappointed."

Amor Kairns began to walk slowly about the pyramid of brushwood where the body had been carelessly covered; though he did not create the impression that he was looking for clues. So many feet had passed that way that it was doubtful if anything of interest could have been left in sight; while the half score of villagers who remained in the woods were roaming restlessly through the underbrush and were threatening to destroy any further evidence which might have been left behind.

"Yes," said Kairns, as he completed his circle of the brushwood and returned to where Mulvaney was standing, "I am frankly disappointed. Facts, somehow, have a strange way of playing freaks with fancy, if this is, indeed, fact."

"It's plain enough to me," Mulvaney declared. "The woman has been murdered. And Dr. Dunmore. . . . Why, damn it all, Amor, we saw him ourselves, this forenoon, almost the last thing before we left The Briar's grounds; and he was heading straight for these woods, and Daisy Spencer had just disappeared into them. What more do you want? He grabbed Kingdon's car and made a break for it; that's all, and that's enough for any person."

"It is, I realize, enough to condemn any man to death,"

Kairns returned reflectively. "And yet that does not prevent it from being fantastic. What a distorted picture, Captain! Imagine it; please try to imagine the distortion. Surely you have not forgotten that prints from the first and second fingers of Dr. Dunmore's right hand were found on the rum-glass on the table where Frank Ashley was shot?"

"Of course I haven't." Mulvaney again became impatient, as he glanced restlessly towards the edge of the woods. "Why the blazes doesn't Dr. Thorley hurry? Of course I haven't forgotten those finger-prints; and if you add them to this, plus Dunmore's flight, you would hardly have to go to a jury with the case."

Kairns nodded his agreement.

"That is one reason I am disappointed," he returned. "The evidence is too nearly perfect; and if you recall, Captain, our friend Theodore Massey did not suggest that Cracksman X would be apt to leave such admirable evidence behind him. That, somehow, does not fit in with his habits. It is so disturbing, Mulvaney, as to be contrary to reason, particularly when you recall that the silencer was wiped clean. And so was the rum-bottle which had been specially opened. No, Captain, my type of mentality—curious as it may be—recoils from the evidence which lies before my eyes. But who is this?"

The new arrival brushed hurriedly through the woods. He barely glanced at Kairns or Mulvaney, and he paused only when he threatened to stumble against the body.

He stood looking down upon the distortion of life; then:

"Hell!" he said, and his voice was high and unnatural. It was Horace Madden.

He glanced about as though suddenly aware of the presence of others. His cheeks were blazing, and his eyes were a turmoil. Then he looked more firmly at Kairns, and it appeared that a violent chain of emotions flashed through his brain.

"What's that thing doing around her neck?" he

demanded hoarsely. "A rope, isn't it? Where'd it come from?"

Amor Kairns did not answer. Instead, he looked frankly at Madden, so frankly and wonderingly that the latter lost some of his turmoil. There was a tableau through the dragging seconds; it reached through a minute or more, and as the seconds paced slowly into eternity, Madden's feverish emotions seemed to subside into something more normal.

"Excuse me," he said brusquely, "I guess I made a fool of myself; but they have been making a fool of me for so long that I suppose I just broke out, that is all."

"Making a fool of you?" Kairns' tone was a question.

"Yes, that gang of people at The Briars, racing all over the place as though they owned it, murdering people right and left. They have made an utter fool of me. Well, I suppose it's coming to me."

Horace Madden was unable to conceal his bitterness; and for an instant the queer thought flashed through Kairns' mind that perhaps there might be some personal hurt to Madden through the death of Daisy Spencer. Possibly some of that showed in Kairns' face; for Madden flushed again, and his eyes threatened to return to their turmoil. But in time he brought himself under control.

"No," he said sharply. "It isn't that. Of course, I am sorry to see the woman has been murdered; frightfully sorry. But, when it comes down to the fine point, she was just as bad as any; perhaps worse than some. So you're wrong about that."

Kairns looked slowly about the woods. The watchers, who had paused for a moment with the arrival of Madden, had returned to their restless searching of the underbrush.

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Madden," Kairns returned, when he had satisfied himself that none of the villagers was within hearing distance. "And now that you have brought up the point about them running all over the place——"

"Pirates," said Madden, almost viciously. "Every last one of them. Here for a purpose—their own purpose."

Oh, don't think I'm the complete fool, Kairns ; for, despite my looks and actions, I am not. I know why they are here, just as well as you."

"Indeed?" said Kairns, and again his tone raised a question.

That irritated Horace Madden.

"Certainly I know why they are here," he insisted, as though he had accepted a challenge. "Don't you suppose I know pirates when I see them? Blasted human vultures, that's what they are. Everyone here for what he can get out of it. Trying to feather their own nests, trying to lure Mrs. Madden away from here, to make another fool of her. That's what they're doing, and pretending to be wise and discerning about it. Lofty thoughts. Hell! To tell you the truth, Kairns, I'd like to shoot every damned last one of them!"

"You suggest," Kairns said quietly, "that there must be some ulterior motive in the background."

"Of course there is, you damned—I beg your pardon; but I was about to call you an ass. Though I know you're not. You're too smooth for that. You haven't been around here for two days without getting your eyes opened. You know all about that Honduras expedition; of course you do. For I pried that out of Jessie Burn. And you know the whole thing was a fake. Or if you don't, you're not as smart as I think you are."

"Fake?" said Kairns, with betraying astonishment.

"You mean I'm telling you something?" Madden stared for some time; then suddenly the harsh lines of his countenance softened. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. It increases my self-esteem, which has been at a pretty low point ever since that flock of pirates hit here. Of course it was a fake. They never intended to go anywhere near Honduras. All they expected was to hire a boat, go somewhere down South and cook up a lot of high-pressure stories about exciting experiences to shock the public. The dear public be damned! And if you're looking for something, you'll find out why that bird Augustini wouldn't

let them go anywhere near Honduras. If you asked me, I would say it was because he is an escaped convict, or something like that."

Horace Madden, apparently, felt greatly relieved because of his outburst. For he turned suddenly and began to move away in the direction of The Briars.

"Please, a moment, Mr. Madden," Kairns begged; and Madden turned and faced them once more. Curiously enough, he was almost himself again.

Kairns smiled at the change.

"Would you care to shoot them all now?" he asked; and after a moment's struggle with his emotions Madden returned a doubtful smile.

"You can see for yourself what they have done to me," he replied. "But, thank goodness, you have helped to restore a portion of my self-respect. I can go back now, and I don't think they can push me off my balance again."

"Before you go, there is one point I would like to take up," Kairns suggested. "Do you mind, or would you suggest some other place less depressing?"

"Go ahead. If you can stand it, I guess I can."

"Then it is just this," Kairns went on. "Would you mind telling me why you ordered Frank Ashley off the grounds a few nights ago?"

"Ashley?" Madden attempted a puzzled stare; then his expression changed abruptly. "But I was forgetting. You're not a fool. So you got that point? Who told you?"

"You were overheard. Perhaps that is all I should say at the moment."

Madden considered the point doubtfully.

"I wonder if they heard all I said to Ashley?" he questioned. "But it doesn't matter. If they didn't hear all, I don't mind telling you myself that I told Hamstead, or Ashley, or whatever you want to call him, that if he didn't get off the grounds and keep away from The Briars, I would shoot him at sight. They told you that, I suppose?"

"No," Kairns returned frankly. "That part, apparently, was not heard. It was merely that you ordered him off the grounds."

"Thanks," Madden returned. "You are at least playing the part of a gentleman, and there is some hope that your example may have a wholesome effect. Anyway, I did tell Ashley that. Not that I really had anything against him. Poor devil! Now don't think I was afraid of him stealing Louise back; for she never does anything quite like that. If she ever ditches me, it won't be for an ex-husband. But to tell you the truth, I think she has had enough of that. I ordered Ashley off the place because I had just come through a bad session with Augustini, and when I saw him on the grounds I took it out of him, that's all."

"So there was trouble with Augustini?" Kairns asked; and Madden gave that some thought. His expression became more reflective, possibly a trifle shrewd.

"I spoke too hastily," he replied at length. "There wasn't actually any trouble; but I had three or four drinks, and you know how a person gets. I started to rag Augustini, accused him of cooking up the whole Honduras affair. Told him it was a fake; you know, just what I have said to you. I wasn't quite myself. Augustini said everything was open and above-board, that they really intended to search for old Spanish treasure—you know about that. I hadn't anything on him; and he made me look cheap; with me making charges and having nothing to back them up. Augustini got the better of me; it made me feel ugly; so when I went out in the yard and found Frank Ashley there, I just took it out of him; told him if I caught him there again I'd shoot him at sight."

"But you didn't mean it?" Kairns asked.

Madden shook his head as though irritated by his memories of the recent past.

"I did, at the time," he declared, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I don't know; I'm a fool in many ways.

If I had a revolver then, I might have shot him. I don't know. But, later, I would rather have shot Augustini."

"Devilish queer remarks, Madden," Kairns suggested; and Madden stared for a time.

"I thought you wanted the truth," he retorted. "What the blazes are you here for if you don't want the truth? I didn't have to tell you that. Do you think I'd be fool enough to say it if it wasn't true? And to think . . . somebody used my revolver, after all! Damned impertinence, I call it!"

Dr. Thorley arrived and immediately began a hurried examination. He was busy and bustling as usual, and before undertaking his work he directed Chief Thompson to keep the natives out of sight.

"Send them home to supper," he snapped peevishly. "Their wives want to hear the news."

Some of them went. Others lingered beyond earshot, but staring curiously.

Dr. Thorley struggled for some time before he could remove the russet cord from Daisy Spencer's throat; then he tossed it aside.

"A vicious brute who tied that," Thorley said, as he looked directly at Horace Madden. "He wasn't taking chances of dead women telling tales."

Dr. Thorley returned to his work. Kairns picked up the cord and began to examine it. Madden peered over his shoulder, while Mulvaney watched impatiently.

"Do you recognize it?" Mulvaney asked of Madden; but the latter did not accept that as personal.

"No, I don't," he returned. "A fancy bit of rope, if you ask me."

Dr. Thorley pronounced death as undoubtedly due to strangulation.

"The rope did it," he said. "I'm certain of that, but of course I'll have to go into it more later. Poor thing; but she couldn't have suffered much. That belt on the forehead must have knocked her unconscious; then he strangled her."

Again Thorley looked directly at Horace Madden ; but the latter did not appear to notice. Thorley jerked his shoulders impatiently ; then busied himself with his duties. Madden watched for a time ; then :

"Good heavens !" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten. Dr. Dunmore has been missing since . . . since about the same time !"

This time it seemed that a wild conflict of emotions surged through Horace Madden's brain. Finally he turned sharply and began to walk rapidly away from the scene of death. He had proceeded barely a dozen paces before he turned and retraced his steps, just as rapidly.

He took the cord from Kairns' hands and examined it more closely.

"No," he pronounced, "that isn't from Dunmore's dressing-gown. I know, for I saw him in the gown this morning, and it's a plaid affair."

Madden again strode away, and this time he did not return. Dr. Thorley watched until all sight of Madden was lost among the trees ; then he turned back to his work.

"Got his nerve, hasn't he ?" he asked, of no one in particular.

"You seem to have your own pet theory, Doctor," Kairns observed.

"Have I ?" Thorley snapped. "Well, if I have, it's none of my business. That's yours."

Dr. Thorley was not to be led into further observations. Instead, he instructed Chief Thompson to have the body removed. The latter called the waiting villagers, and when the procession moved away Kairns remained behind. Mulvaney, though impatient with the delay, also remained on the scene.

"There might be some more positive clue," Kairns apologized for the delay ; but Mulvaney was not greatly disposed to search.

"My main clue," he said heavily, "is Dr. Dunmore's retreat. But I'd like to know where he got that cord."

Kairns did not answer. Instead, he spent the next

quarter of an hour going over the scene of the latest murder. He failed to find anything of interest.

"Not even the weapon with which she was struck down," he remarked. "Though possibly that would not do us much good. The main thing is that she was strangled to death with a fancy cord taken from somewhere inside The Briars. That should not be difficult to trace. That is one reason I have delayed, Captain—to give the people at The Briars a few minutes to collect themselves after the tragic announcement. As for the rope, it is obvious that it must have come from somewhere inside the house. You detect that, though it is not quite new, it has not been exposed to the weather. Besides, it is not the sort of thing which would be used for any outside purpose. So what does that tell us, Mulvaney?"

"I suppose," Mulvaney returned with an overdone sigh, "if we have to go through this sort of thing, we have to, and that's all there is to it. Now let's talk it over and give Dr. Dunmore a real good chance to dig in somewhere, say in New York."

"Tut, tut! Captain, why such impatience?" Cairns seemed pleased rather than the opposite. "But since you are not in the mood to use your powers of observation, possibly you will pardon me if I call your attention to a fairly obvious point. This bit of cord, about three feet in length, of rust shade, with tassels at both ends, is far from the sort of thing a person, murderer or otherwise, would be apt to carry around in his pockets. Nor is it the sort of rope which a person contemplating murder by strangulation would be likely to purchase. A nice three-foot section of clothes-line would serve the purpose just as well, and would be less likely to break. Yet we find a fancy cord used instead. So what does that tell us? . . . But, pardon me, you are not in the mood to think. So I will answer my own question, Mulvaney. It tells us that the opportunity to murder Daisy Spencer was presented to some person suddenly; that he had not prepared for it, at least not in this way. But when the opportunity came

suddenly—in other words, when he saw Daisy Spencer enter the woods—he thought abruptly of strangulation, and he grasped the first available cord which came to his hand. . . .”

“Exactly,” Mulvaney interrupted, with a touch of triumph. “When Dr. Dunmore saw Miss Spencer enter the woods, as we know he did . . .”

Mulvaney hesitated.

“Exactly,” Kairns added, “if you will permit me to use your word. When Dr. Dunmore saw Miss Spencer enter the woods, he was in our presence, on the open lawns—and not inside the house—and the last we saw of him he was walking across the lawn, in the direction of the woods, and he had informed us that he intended to find out what Daisy Spencer meant by speaking to him as she did about his sports coat. You would not suggest, I presume, that he had anticipated that she would enter the woods, and that he had already provided himself with this cord for the purpose of strangulation?”

“He must have.”

“But it doesn’t fit. A person who had prepared for the strangulation, even if he could have guessed that Daisy Spencer would enter the woods—and who had not merely responded to the lure of strangulation on the spur of the moment—would have provided himself with an entirely different kind of rope. There must be all kinds of old rope and wire around a place like this. Suppose, Captain, merely to gratify my strange strain of vanity, you give me a few more minutes of your time before sending out the alarm for Dr. Dunmore. A few minutes, more or less, can scarcely matter in his case, while vanity is impatient at delay. Thank you, Captain. We will prowl, if it pleases you, not about the front doorway of The Briars, but at the rear.”

Kairns led the way through the woods and along the pathway to The Briars. He swerved across the spacious lawns, in the direction of the buildings at the rear where much less attention had been paid to mere surface appearances.

"You have doubtless observed long ago," Kairns remarked, as they found themselves in an area which might have been defined as the backyard, "that The Briars is fairly ancient. At one time it appears to have been rather pretentious, the show-place, I imagine, of the district. There are old buildings, once carriage-houses, you may wager; but now turned into garages. Quite a cluster of buildings. And this, I fancy, is the laundry. Let us observe."

They entered, with Kairns in the lead. It was a combination of many things: of laundry, storage-room, and a distinct reminder of the past.

"Mulvaney, I am irritated," Kairns declared, as he glanced about the building. "A huge place, is it not? But this is really much too simple. You notice clothes-line by the yard; much of it in use, of course; but a pile of it in that distant corner. Let us try it. . . . Yes, really strong stuff, and most pliable. Such an easy thing, Captain, for any person with the slightest ambition towards strangulation to have snipped off a few feet with a pocket-knife. . . . And now, suppose we glance into the loft?"

The building, though old, was in good repair. The stairs led to a roomy loft piled with a variety of objects which had apparently once belonged to the main residence.

Kairns began to rummage.

"Too simple, much too simple," he remarked a few minutes later. "You see, Captain, already I have discovered an old picture with the wire still clinging to the frame. A good four feet of it. What a silly picture that must have been in the old days! But possibly that does not matter. You observe that, though the picture is ancient, the wire is still substantial; only faint signs of rust. And what a delightful weapon that would have made. Now I, for one, would have preferred that to a fancy bit of rust-coloured rope. You detect my line of reasoning, Captain? But of course my reasoning would have been sound even if we had not found both rope and wire with the barest of effort. For I was already fully aware

of the fact that there are some yards of surplus rope on the nets at the tennis courts. So you see, I am merely emphasizing a point. The person who strangled Daisy Spencer evidently did not plan it for any great period in advance. For if he had, it would have been so simple to snip off a little rope or wire in a spot like this without fearing detection. But what did he do? He snatched up a bit of fancy cord from somewhere within the house; thus suggesting that the deed was committed on the spur of the moment, and that the whole thing was planned rapidly, and without much detailed thought, after he saw her enter the woods."

"All right," Mulvaney returned obstinately. "Patch it together any way you like. Dunmore had time, after we last saw him, to swing round, enter the house, get that bit of cord, then go on to the woods and strangle the woman. But we know he strangled her; so why waste any more time?"

"Possibly for the sake of my suffering vanity," Kairns returned. "But since you grow impatient, I will ask merely a few more minutes of your time. If you do not object, we will drop in and see Mrs. Madden."

"It can't do any harm." Mulvaney begrudged the time.

Phipps answered the door. Rather he anticipated them. Regardless of how the balance of the household had come through the news of the second murder, Phipps retained his calm.

"It is, sir, frightful," he said. "And if you will pardon me, I would like to apologize for the condition of the household. But you wished to see Mrs. Madden, sir?"

Kairns looked at Phipps curiously; then he smiled slightly.

"The 'sir', Phipps," he replied, "is quite out of place."

"Possibly I am a trifle confused, Mr. Kairns," he returned. "But, you understand, the situation has been trying."

"I think I understand more than that," said Kairns, as he handed an envelope to Phipps. "Please look at it now."

Phipps opened it slowly, read a few lines, then a wave of relief seemed to sweep over his countenance. It was, possibly, the only real expression which they had seen on Phipps' face since their first contact with him.

Phipps read to the end. Then he folded the paper and placed the letter in his pocket.

"You are, sir, still 'sir' to me," he said. "I still have my part to play. It would be folly, Mr. Kairns, to relax for even a moment. This house is poisonous; but I am still the butler. Though I cannot say how glad I am that you know my position. I will seek an opportunity for further discussion; and in the meantime, you wished to see Mrs. Madden, sir?"

"Thank you, Phipps."

The butler turned, with his perfect poise, and walked calmly up the broad stairway.

"An admirable individual, eh, Mulvaney?" Kairns observed. "But we must remember that this house is, as he says poisonous."

But, if poisonous, it seemed deserted, like some gloomy cavern. No one came their way until Phipps returned.

"This way, sir," said Phipps, and his face was again that of the well-schooled butler.

He led them to the upper alcove where they had first seen Mrs. Ashley Madden. Phipps bowed, then turned and left them.

Mrs. Madden and Jessie Burn were there, in the alcove, in the same relative positions where Kairns and Mulvaney had found them on the occasion of their first visit; but beyond that, many things were changed. The grey shawl had fallen from about Mrs. Madden's shoulders and lay a crumpled mass upon the floor. She had pushed the foot-stool aside, as though that pretence were worn thin; and apparently an agitated hand had recently run through her once smoothly parted hair and had robbed her almost entirely of that matronly air of ease and resignation which had first distinguished her. Jessie Burn, too, was changed. It was fright which showed most conspicuously in her

manner ; well-controlled fright, but still a positive and dominating emotion.

"I know it wasn't Phipps who murdered her!" Jessie Burn exclaimed, before there was even a pretence at greeting. "I know that. For Phipps was in the house all forenoon ; though that is the only thing I am sure of . . . and the only person, besides myself and Louise."

Jessie Burn's voice was slightly hysterical. Kairns chose a chair leisurely. Mulvaney sat down abruptly, and still impatiently. Mrs. Madden's eyes seemed to flame ; and one hand raced towards her hair, then fell at her side.

"My dear Miss Burn," Kairns said rather gently, "how ridiculous of you ! . . . Surely you are not forgetting that Dr. Dunmore has departed most hastily ?"

Jessie Burn looked directly at Mrs. Madden. It was a peculiarly prolonged stare. For a time she appeared to have forgotten entirely the presence of Kairns and Mulvaney ; and Mrs. Madden, in her turn, seemed to be experiencing a conflict of emotions. There were flashes of surprise, intermixed with doubt ; and in the end she laughed hollowly.

"Of course, Jessie dear," she said at length ; "it is utterly silly of us." Then she looked at Kairns as though astonished to find him there.

"We have both been childish"—she spoke to Kairns. "What Jessie really should have said is that we both are greatly relieved to know that the murderer is no longer in our midst ; though, of course, it is a great shock to know it could have been Dr. Dunmore."

"Yes, Louise." Miss Burn picked up the thread. "Neither of us fancied that it could have been the doctor. He may be a rather high-tempered and hectic person ; but when one comes to know him . . . Ah, I mean, we thought . . . Yes, Louise dear, we have both been quite childish, just as you have said."

Mrs. Madden went through a smoothing operation. Her hair was improved by the process ; and for a moment

it seemed she was upon the point of picking up the grey shawl. Mulvaney anticipated the movement.

"Thank you, Captain, you are so thoughtful." She favoured him with a smile as she accepted the garment. Then almost instantly she permitted it to slip through her fingers again. "Just as Jessie was about to say, I think this will be the first night since Mr. Hamstead's murder that we will be able to sleep in peace. You cannot imagine what a frightful strain it has been. Possibly you would help us to celebrate our feeling of relief by remaining for dinner."

"Thank you ever so much," Mulvaney returned, "but there is a busy evening ahead of me. I mean, if . . ."

Mulvaney glanced at Kairns.

"You see, Mrs. Madden," Kairns remarked, "the Captain is growing tremendously impatient with me. What he meant to say was that he had a busy evening ahead of him if I would permit him to get at it. So just another moment's delay, Mrs. Madden, and we will be along our way. Would you mind informing me if you have ever seen this before?"

Amor Kairns drew the russet cord from his pocket and held it up to the light until the tasselled ends glistened as he swayed them gently.

"Why, of course," Mrs. Madden hastened to reply. "Or . . . I may have been too ready. There are, I presume, many cords of that nature in the world."

"I mean, could you associate it with The Briars?"

Mrs. Madden extended a hand, and Mulvaney reached her the rope which had played its vital part in the death of Daisy Spencer.

But Mrs. Madden did not accept the cord. Her hand drew back and a touch of fright crossed her countenance.

"You mean . . .?" she asked. "Horace has told us something."

"Suppose we put it upon a strictly impersonal plane," Kairns suggested; and Mrs. Madden accepted the prompting with some effort.

"Yes," she said, a moment later, as she glanced at Jessie Burn.

"Yes," Miss Burn repeated, "there cannot be the slightest doubt about it. Mrs. Madden is reluctant to identify the cord, and I do not blame her, since this whole situation is repugnant to her disposition. But I will identify it. The cord, Mr. Kairns, is from a window-curtain in one of the guest-rooms. I should know, for I helped to choose the materials when Mrs. Madden had the house re-decorated."

"Thanks," said Kairns, "but which guest occupied the room?"

"Which? Oh, Dr. Dunmore."

Mulvaney made a noise not entirely gentlemanly, but which adequately expressed his triumph. All three looked at him; and Jessie Burn frowned slightly.

"Well, Amor," the Captain remarked, "if that is all, I think we should be running along."

"Just a moment," Kairns insisted. "Can there be any doubt of the room, Miss Burn?"

"I do not think so," she replied. "And, to the best of my information, there is no other such cord at The Briars, except, of course, the one which is probably left on the other window-curtain. But if you wish to check for yourself, it is quite simple."

Jessie Burn rose, and both Kairns and Mulvaney followed the example. Mrs. Madden remained seated; and as they glanced at her, one hand again moved towards her hair, then fell at her side.

Miss Burn led the way from the alcove, into the broad upper rotunda, then down one of the long wings of The Briars.

"It is on this floor," she said. "Yes, this is the room. Mrs. Madden places many duties upon me. One of them is to allot the rooms to the guests. At any rate, this is the room which Dr. Dunmore occupied."

Jessie Burn stood aside while Kairns and Mulvaney entered. She followed almost instantly.

Kairns glanced directly at the window. It was one of those long, sweeping affairs, not quite of the french variety, but of that old style which reaches almost from the floor to the ceiling. It was massively draped with heavy velour of deep russet shade. One half of the curtain was looped back and held in place by a rust-coloured cord with a tassel at either end. But the second portion of the curtain dangled freely, and it sagged gently back and forth in the draught from the door to the window.

Mulvaney stepped forward as Kairns compared the two cords.

"Not the slightest doubt of it," Mulvaney declared. "Well, Amor, I think I'll be on my way."

Kairns glanced at Jessie Burn.

Strangely enough, the fright seemed to have returned to her eyes.

"You are forgetting," he said, "that Dr. Dunmore must be a long distance from The Briars by this time."

"Why, of course," she returned, as she shook her head sharply. "How silly of me!"

CHAPTER XXVI

AMOR KAIRNS did not agree with Jessie Burn that it was silly of her. On the contrary, he looked at her with such evident curiosity that she repeated the statement.

"Extremely silly," she added, as though hoping that might end the matter. Then she tried to smile reassuringly, but it was not wholly a success.

"In that event," Kairns replied, "possibly I may be permitted to glance through Dr. Dunmore's possessions . . . seeing he has departed so certainly for parts unknown."

Kairns did not wait for Jessie Burn's assurance that it was quite all right. Instead, he began to prowl through the dresser where Dr. Dunmore had apparently kept most of his belongings."

"Fascinating, eh, Mulvaney?" he asked. "If you follow me, you will observe that the doctor could not have taken many of his possessions with him—if any. What do you propose to do with them, Miss Burn? Make a donation to charity?"

Jessie Burn, caught entirely off her guard, shuddered.

"Why yes, of course," she said hastily—"or I don't know. We'll have to think it over. I suppose they must belong to some person."

"Yes," Kairns agreed. "They must. Particularly this little book which I have located. You observe, Captain, that it is what is commonly known as a money-order book. Several express orders, I see. . . ."

"For heaven's sake, Kairns, don't use that tone of voice," Mulvaney flared. "I can stand just so much."

"Thanks, Captain. I think I detect the danger line. So, if I have not mistaken the signals . . . Oh, pardon us, Miss Burn. I apologize for the Captain. You possibly

have observed that his theory is entirely contrary to yours. Now that should be reassuring . . . to you. . . . Should it not?"

"I guess so," Jessie Burn returned doubtfully. "I mean, of course it is, if *he* is right."

"I can assure you, Miss Burn, that he is . . . sometimes."

Mulvaney went to stare through the window.

"Now, Miss Burn," Kairns went on, "since the Captain has parted company with us, possibly we may have a private conversation. I have just located Dr. Dunmore's express money-order book . . . meaning, naturally, that he did not take it with him. Quite a little sum, I see, with only two order forms torn off. In other words, most of the book is left. . . . Let me see . . . Several hundred dollars. Yes, it runs just over a thousand. How careless of the doctor!"

Miss Burn seemed relieved.

"He must have been terribly frightened," she suggested, "to leave all that money behind."

"He is, of course, rather well-to-do?" Kairns asked.

"How should I know?"

"Possibly you shouldn't; but you must have a general idea. Just where would you place him, Miss Burn? Among the really well-to-do, or . . . you know?"

Jessie Burn considered that for a time.

"I don't think he had much money to speak of, if that is what you mean," she returned.

"And that, of course, is precisely what I mean. Well, Captain, you may now rejoin the party."

The Captain did, without much grace.

Jessie Burn followed them to the main doorway.

"You think? . . ." she said, as they started to move away, "I mean, is the Captain's theory right?"

"Meaning, naturally, that I was right a few moments ago when I suggested you did not entirely agree with Mr. Mulvaney," Kairns replied. "And as I observed some time ago, Miss Burn, the Captain is right—sometimes."

Miss Burn closed the door abruptly. Possibly that was in the hope of concealing the flash of fright which returned to her countenance.

Mulvaney proceeded to "be upon his way". That consisted of searching for Jasper Kingdon, and he was inclined to press for rapid strides.

"I think, Mulvaney," Kairns suggested, "that if you were less anxious to make progress, you would be impressed by the fact that we really should do something, as quickly as possible, to relieve the feelings of certain people at The Briars."

"That's just what I'm trying to do," Mulvaney returned shortly, as he quickened his stride.

They found Kingdon on the main driveway, as though he were on guard, waiting for the return of his car. Kingdon apparently possessed marked self-control. But, despite that, his youthful countenance bore a striking resemblance to Jessie Burn and Mrs. Madden. At least, it was stamped with the same mixture of alarm and astonishment.

Mulvaney plunged directly. He obtained a thorough description of Kingdon's car and Dr. Dunmore's address in the New York suburbs.

"Devilish queer of the doctor," Kingdon volunteered, when Mulvaney seemed satisfied. "Think I'll ever get the car back, Mr. Kairns?"

"I presume it is insured," Kairns returned; and Kingdon attempted a smile.

"I'm not much of a business man," Kingdon admitted. "But I'm good enough for that. Anything else I can do for you?"

"You might tell us the conditions under which Dr. Dunmore took your car this forenoon, and about what time?"

"Dashed glad to," Kingdon returned, as he offered cigarettes. "I was just knocking around the garages, wishing for heaven's sake there was something to do besides think of this mess, when the doc. came up and asked if I would loan him the car for a few hours. That's all. So I let him have it."

"For a few hours?"

"That is what he said. . . . But I suppose now . . ." Kingdon broke off in a strange way; and Kairns glanced at him as curiously as he had looked at Jessie Burn only a few minutes earlier.

"Perhaps we won't go into that," Kairns returned. "And the time?"

"As nearly as I can put it . . . eleven-thirty."

Kairns looked at Mulvaney; and the latter was beginning to display some interest.

"When Dr. Dunmore entered the garage, did you see which direction he came from?"

"No. The first I saw of him he was in the doorway."

"And his manner?"

Kingdon did not answer directly. Instead, he looked at Kairns with that queer uncertainty which had appeared so much a part of the attitude of Jessie Burn and Mrs. Madden.

"A dashed strange question, Mr. Kairns," he said at length. "I thought Dr. Dunmore had skipped out; and Miss Spencer is dead."

"Still," Kairns assured, "I am interested in Dr. Dunmore's manner when he asked for the loan of your car."

"So am I," Kingdon snapped out the words. "He was just as cool as you are at this minute. Not a thing wrong with him that I could see."

"So," Kairns considered. "Fascinating, is it not, Captain? But I said that before; so you will pardon me. Have you anything more to tell us, Mr. Kingdon?"

"Not a thing."

"The doctor didn't say where he was going?"

"He didn't; and when I asked him, he just said, 'To get away from this hell-hole for a few hours.' Since I could sympathize with him, I let him have the car."

"Thanks, Mr. Kingdon; if anything of interest happens, you know where to get us."

Kairns resumed his journey down the driveway at Mulvaney's side ; and when he glanced over his shoulder after a dozen paces Kingdon was standing quite still, watching them from the centre of the roadway.

"From the way Kingdon acts," Kairns suggested, "I imagine there is a very good reason why he wants to get his car back in a hurry."

"Perhaps," Mulvaney conceded absently. "But didn't he say it was insured?"

"I said," Kairns reminded, "that I imagined there was a very good reason."

"So you did," Mulvaney admitted. "But what is that? I see I must humour you."

"I doubt if Kingdon has been hanging around this driveway because of its pleasant association. So he could be watching for Dunmore to bring back the car ; and that could mean he was anxious to get away from Burleigh long enough to get in touch with a vague individual known as Simon Alvarez."

"Oh, that?" Mulvaney did not accept it seriously. "Of course that could be possible ; but it doesn't matter now."

"Doesn't it?" said Kairns ; and Mulvaney did not trouble to answer.

They had barely come within sight of Mulvaney's car when it became obvious that it had an occupant in the front seat.

"A visitor," Kairns remarked. "And unless I miss my guess, it is Theodore Massey's quarry."

"Who? Oh, Tubby Sangster." Mulvaney found some amusement in that, for he laughed a little. "Dashed interesting, isn't it, Amor, how some of the best of them go wrong at times? I took Massey for a pretty shrewd chap. What did you think about it?"

"Pretty much the same," Kairns agreed.

"But I would like nothing better than to be around when he first hears of the latest developments," Mulvaney laughed again. "You know, Amor, there are some bright

spots in our business ; and that would be one of them. Sure enough, it's Sangster."

A moment later there could be no doubt of it ; for Tubby Sangster threw open the door and thrust out his head to greet them.

Sangster was in striking contrast to other members of The Briars' household whom they had seen recently. He was not exactly all smiles ; but he was at least placid and well content with the drift of events. From one angle, it was refreshing to escape the suggestion of alarm which had characterized so many others during the past hour or so.

"You'll excuse me," Sangster begged, though purely for the sake of politeness. "But not having anything else to do, I thought I'd park myself here and wait until you came back. I wanted to tell you that I've had my lesson."

"Indeed?" Kairns questioned. "Surely, Mr. Sangster, you are not speaking from the angle of the morals of this case?"

Sangster grinned.

"Not seeing any morals in it from first to last, I guess not," he returned. "What I meant was that I have learned not to leave my cigarettes hanging around in plain sight."

"It does rather clear your skirts," Kairns replied. "And I can't blame you for taking the latest events cheerfully. You did seem to be in a tight spot. So you think some person lifted some of your privately marked cigarettes and left the stubs on the ash-tray?"

Tubby Sangster seemed astonished. Some of the calm left his round face.

"Don't you?" he demanded.

"Well, Dr. Dunmore isn't with us any longer," Kairns evaded.

"Devilish queer. . . . I mean, the doctor has some queer streaks." Sangster shifted so suddenly that it was obvious the first two words carried the greatest significance.

"So you were surprised to find the doctor had disappeared?" Kairns questioned; but Sangster was not disposed to commit himself.

"I just wanted you to know," he said, as he stepped from the car, "that I've had my lesson. You won't find me leaving cigarettes around like that again. But, you know, I would like to have a hand in squaring the account with the bird who took . . . Well, I must be running along to dinner."

Sangster left them. He seemed pleased with events as he strolled up the driveway.

Mulvaney was inclined to drive to the village in silence; but it was Kairns' turn to become talkative.

"What a fascinating picture is gradually emerging, Mulvaney," he began; but that was interrupted by a sound resembling a snort, impolite though the word may be.

"Gradually?" Mulvaney laughed. "Perhaps; but it may move a whole lot faster after I get headquarters on Dr. Dunmore's trail. They'll contact New York and all the cities around, large and small. Besides, you remember Kingdon gave me the doctor's address just outside New York. With a bit of luck, we might nab him inside a few hours."

"As I said, before you interrupted so crudely," Kairns replied, "a most fascinating picture is developing, *gradually*. You observe, of course, that I emphasized the word 'gradually'. For it is precisely that, Mul, and nothing else."

"Cracksman X." Mulvaney's tone suggested that he was enjoying a measure of triumph. "Imagine it, Amor, a red-headed and red-whiskered cracksman. Why the blazes some person couldn't have given the world that description of Cracksman X long before this beats me. But there you have it. Self-confessed, through flight."

"As I observed, so patiently," Kairns resumed. "An extremely fascinating picture is gradually developing. Possibly you detected the queer conflict of viewpoint at The Briars, following announcement of the murder of Daisy Spencer?"

"And why shouldn't they be hipped?" Mulvaney demanded.

"They should. But it wasn't exactly that, as you would doubtless have detected had you devoted a little more time to the psychology of the case. 'Hipped', being a crude word, doesn't express the sentiments of Horace Madden, Mrs. Madden, Jessie Burn, or Jasper Kingdon, as such sentiments were reflected by outward actions too plain to be overlooked. As for Tubby Sangster, his dominating emotion was clearly one of relief. There could be two reasons why Sangster should feel relieved, Mul. What are they? Must I cite them? Very well. Sangster could feel relieved because of a conviction that the murderer was no longer in their midst; or he could experience the same sensation because he himself was the murderer and circumstances had thrown damning evidence upon another man. As for Horace Madden, his sentiment was too confused to be readily legible. I would not care to attempt to read the man's emotions. But Jessie Burn, Mrs. Madden, and Kingdon all followed a sufficiently similar pattern to create cause for wonder. If you are following me, Captain, which I greatly doubt, you will realize that all three were oppressed by amazement, mixed with a little fear. You grasp the point? If they had accepted Dr. Dunmore's flight as one hundred per cent perfect—or should I say genuine?—they could hardly have conducted themselves in the manner which we observed."

Mulvaney did not appear greatly impressed. At least, he did not attempt to answer; and a minute or two later they found themselves in the midst of Burleigh's excitement. It was scarcely that there was any display about it; but the main street was more thickly populated than they had previously seen it, and the clusters of citizens glanced up eagerly when they passed, as though hoping for more details from the latest thrill.

"You notice," said Kairns, "there, in front of the post-office, Miss Fargo and our dusky friend Leander Augustini. We must at least give Augustini credit for being the only

member of The Briars household to dare the main street. You know, Captain, I have an idea that it might not be a complete loss of effort if I should take Miss Fargo into our further confidence and see if Burleigh's chain of secret service can discover whether or not any person was seen to enter or leave Dr. Dunmore's room this forenoon."

"Go to it, if you want wasted effort." Mulvaney had his eyes on the telephone office and was not inclined to suffer further delay. "But as for me, I'm going to settle down to practical work. The person I want is Dr. Dunmore, and you can have anybody who entered or left his room this forenoon if it provides any gratification. You'll excuse me, Amor, but I'm hopping right out for the long-distance."

Mulvaney followed words with action. He went directly to the telephone office to notify Ridgeport headquarters, but he flung back a remark over his shoulder that he should be "ready for supper" in a half hour.

Kairns went directly to the Orient Hotel. He was able to make the brief trip without interruption, for Deacon Jones was not within sight, and Mamie Fargo had disappeared from in front of the post-office. But Mrs. Baxter was waiting, almost as eagerly as a mother who greets a long-lost son.

Mrs. Baxter fluttered. She talked about the meal which had been waiting for the past forty-five minutes ; she mixed it with the murder of Daisy Spencer ; then she raced to the kitchen upon learning that Mulvaney would still be a half hour or so.

Kairns dropped into a convenient chair in the reception rotunda. He had occupied his position for perhaps three minutes when a figure passed through the main doorway. It was Mamie Fargo. When she saw him she was more restrained than Mrs. Baxter, but the shrewd old eyes told the same story.

"It is almost vulgar of me," she said, but she did not hesitate to draw a chair quite close. "There are times, Mr. Kairns, when a person has to be inquisitive ; but, of course, as you realize, it is for the sake of Aunt Sarah Jane. The

poor thing has so little to occupy her thoughts, and since she has become so interested in the affair at The Briars, I feel it is no more than my duty to be of assistance to her, if possible. Do you not think so, Mr. Cairns? On account of her rheumatism."

"Indeed I do," Cairns agreed readily; and Miss Fargo smiled almost youthfully.

"As I have said to Aunt Sarah Jane a half-dozen times today, you are a most discerning man," she returned. "And it is too bad you have not met Aunt Sarah Jane. She really takes a pride in civic affairs. I think that is the reason she had Mrs. Thompson up for tea this afternoon."

Miss Fargo's head seemed to be perched shrewdly over one shoulder.

"Mrs. Thompson?" Cairns questioned vaguely.

"The Chief's wife, of course. Don't be silly. But excuse me. If you knew Burleigh as well as Aunt Sarah Jane, you would know that Chief Thompson is the sort of man who must have a confidant. I am not saying that the Chief is disposed to be pompous in his own home; but Mrs. Thompson is a meek woman, and you have seen the Chief. You can understand?"

"I think so, Miss Fargo."

"I thought you would. So Aunt Sarah Jane had Mrs. Thompson up for tea this afternoon. You can hardly imagine, Mr. Cairns, how it took her mind off her rheumatism; but little things like that mean a lot to a person in the position of Aunt Sarah Jane. They had a delightful chat."

Miss Mamie Fargo nodded so sharply that it suggested a victory of some sort.

"You were present, naturally?" Cairns asked.

"Aunt Sarah Jane's affliction affects her hands, so I poured tea."

Miss Fargo looked at Cairns firmly for some time, but the latter permitted events to drift.

"Little things came out," Miss Fargo added at length. "They aroused Aunt Sarah Jane's curiosity. Of course

when a person like Aunt Sarah Jane has the civic interest at heart she can hardly overlook anything which may develop. And she thought that, perhaps, since you were so kind as to tell us about the silencer found in the pocket of the pool-table, with all finger-prints wiped off it, you might be willing to tell us whose prints were found on the rum-glass."

"The rum-glass?" Kairns appeared astonished.

Miss Fargo smiled shrewdly.

"I think I implied, though I did not wish to put it into direct words," she returned, "that Chief Thompson is the sort who must talk impressively to a meek wife. Should I say more, Mr. Kairns?"

"I doubt it," Kairns laughed. "And purely on account of Aunt Sarah Jane's rheumatism, Miss Fargo, I am going to answer your question. The prints on the rum-glass were Dr. Dunmore's."

"Oh!" said Mamie Fargo; then, "Oh!" Then she fell silent and stared at Kairns in a peculiar way.

"Exactly," he said. "You have thoughts, Miss Fargo."

"Have I?" she replied slowly. "How amazing! I mean to say, Aunt Sarah Jane is going to find this amazing—most amazing. . . . There couldn't be any mistake?"

"Impossible."

Miss Fargo developed a trace of Mrs. Baxter's fluttering. She might have developed it to greater extent, but Mulvaney passed through the doorway and stood scowling at the scene. So Miss Fargo left the Orient Hotel hurriedly.

CHAPTER XXVII

"DAMNED female!" said Mulvaney, as he watched Miss Fargo's retreat. "That's the trouble with this clacking village. But I suppose we won't have to be pestered with that sort of thing much longer."

Whether it pleased Mulvaney or otherwise, there was little "pestering" through the evening meal. For Mrs. Baxter, contrary to her earlier spirit of hospitality, ignored them almost entirely. She made one hurried trip to the table shortly after they were seated; but after that, the kitchen girl performed the duties of waitress, while a distant sound of voices, accompanied by an occasional ringing of the telephone, suggested the manner in which Mrs. Baxter was occupied.

"Enjoying herself," said Mulvaney, half-way through the meal, when Kairns was unusually silent. "Well, let her. As for me, I'm wondering if I shouldn't hop right back to Ridgeport tonight. You never can tell. I gave the Chief as clear an outline of the whole show as I could, but it needs the personal touch."

Kairns did not answer. His mind appeared far distant.

"What do you think, Amor?" Mulvaney asked patronizingly. "Don't you think it needs the personal touch in Ridgeport? You know how it is; unless I'm there, they may not put the right punch into the job, and they could let Dunmore slip through their fingers just for the lack of the right thing at the right moment."

"What did the Chief say about it?" Kairns asked absent-mindedly.

"Oh, he just said he'd look after things at that end, and for me to stick around here. But you know how the Chief is sometimes, Amor. Means well, you know; but . . .

Hang it all, I wish I hadn't asked him, then I could have gone of my own accord."

Kairns did not answer. Instead, he lapsed into another period of abstraction through which mastication became a matter of sheer mechanics.

"That's right, Amor, think it over seriously," Mulvaney encouraged. "But if I were you, I wouldn't put sugar on my meat like that. Here is the salt."

"You know, Mul," Kairns finally emerged, "I am beginning to think I have made a serious mistake."

"Glad to hear you admit it, Amor," Mulvaney returned importantly. "That is a sign of real greatness."

Kairns removed the grains of sugar from his meat as carefully as though he were counting the fragments.

"But there is always a chance, Captain," he replied, "that we may be speaking from slightly variant angles. You have been talking for some time, I believe, but you will pardon me if my memory is not clear as to the exact words you used. So possibly you were on the same point as myself. I didn't speak to Miss Fargo about the possibility of some person having entered Dr. Dunmore's room this forenoon."

"Oh, that?" said Mulvaney lightly. "Of course, one of the maids must have entered, to straighten up the room, for it was spick and span when we were there."

"You observe," Kairns continued, as though he had still failed to hear the Captain's exact words, "there is such a fascinating peculiarity to the actions of this murderer—assuming it should be Dr. Dunmore—that merely for the sake of my mental dignity I feel impelled to ask further questions. Kingdon informed us, I believe, that it was approximately eleven-thirty when Dr. Dunmore asked for the loan of his car. Now, Captain, if you will cast back in your memory to the time when we saw Dr. Dunmore moving across the lawn at The Briars, while Daisy Spencer was at the outskirts of the woods, you will recall that it must have been desperately close to eleven-thirty, if not quite. A wretched pity, is it not, that Dr. Thorley could not tell us the exact minute when the woman was murdered?"

Medical science might hit it, within a couple of hours, but this happens to be a case when medical science fails us."

Mulvaney laughed rather freely.

"And since medical science has failed us," he said, "I have turned the police of several states on Dr. Dunmore's trail. I expect several states must have heard of it by this time; or if they haven't, they will within a few hours."

"A pity," Kairns repeated. "A great pity, for that matter. They have lunch at The Briars, I presume, around one o'clock. Mrs. Madden's prestige as a hostess could not permit a much earlier hour. So that would leave an hour and a half, and even if they were so plebeian as to have lunch by twelve-thirty, that would leave an hour."

"What you talking about?" Mulvaney demanded, without any great show of patience.

"Would you mind calling up The Briars and asking what time they had lunch?" Kairns returned.

At first it was not quite plain how Mrs. Baxter could have approached half-way across the room without being heard, but a glance at an open doorway at their backs explained matters.

"Now isn't that strange?" she exclaimed almost breathlessly. "That is the very point Aunt Sarah Jane wants to know. I didn't think much about it at the time she called, but I'll find out at once." Mrs. Baxter retreated.

Mulvaney scowled.

"Women again," he said. "Damned women! What can that have to do with it?"

"The damned women?" Kairns countered.

"No. You know what I mean. What can the hour of lunch have to do with it?"

"A great deal, if by chance circumstances are playing a most peculiar fantasy with Dr. Dunmore. And you know, Mul, it is never wise to overlook what may be defined as the domestic psychology of a situation. In this case, one phase of the domestic psychology is the strange reaction of Jessie Burn, Mrs. Madden, and Jasper Kingdon to the announcement of Dr. Dunmore's so-called flight."

"Huh!" said Mulvaney. "They might have been afraid of something, as you said a bit ago; but all they were afraid of was that I might not catch the murderer, and that he might come back on them. And even if they were astonished about something, what of it? I suppose they were astonished that we permitted a second murder to happen right under our noses."

The Captain seemed so thoroughly satisfied with events that Cairns did not reply.

Then Mrs. Baxter returned, still in a flutter, with the announcement that lunch hour at The Briars had been called for twelve forty-five.

"That is what Mary Roper just told me over the 'phone," she declared, as she began to remove Mulvaney's dessert before he had quite finished. "Oh, excuse me, Mr. Mulvaney; but this situation is so unusual. I do hope it doesn't last much longer."

"For your sake," Mulvaney returned brusquely, "and for the sake of Burleigh, I hope so too. Now, Mrs. Baxter, that pudding is too delicious to be whisked away from me in that manner."

"But of course lunch today was not held at twelve forty-five," Mrs. Baxter rushed on. "Mary Roper says they were all gathered near the dining-room—I mean all except Miss Spencer—at that hour, but they delayed fifteen minutes, expecting she would appear."

Mrs. Baxter waited expectantly.

"So that makes an hour and fifteen minutes, Captain," Cairns observed. "The fact of the matter is, I am beginning to think I should pursue my original line of thought. . . ."

Cairns did not get any farther with his remarks. For it became evident, in a variety of ways, that something unusual had come into the life of Burleigh. There was a strange wild clamouring from the front of the Orient Hotel. Some person not far distant shrieked, and the tone suggested the feminine. The telephone rang with a mad insistence which indicated the abnormal; while Mrs. Baxter dropped a dish and literally fled for the front of the building.

"Damn !" Mulvaney exclaimed, as he leaped to his feet. "Now what the blazes has come over this mad town ?"

Mulvaney rushed in the direction taken by Mrs. Baxter. Kairns followed more leisurely ; and because of that, he was nearly trampled by a frenzied dash on the part of the kitchen-maid. Ted Baxter bounded down the stairway and crashed into him ; and by the time he reached the front of the hotel it was evident that a mild form of madness had gripped the village.

Mrs. Baxter grasped him by the arm and practically dragged him through the front doorway.

"There !" she exclaimed breathlessly. "There ! Can't you see ? In that car. See ! The red whiskers ! It's Dr. Dunmore . . . come back ! . . . Oh-h-h-h !"

That, somehow, seemed to express the general sentiment of the village of Burleigh.

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was, undoubtedly, Dr. Karl Dunmore, driving through the village at a leisurely pace in the direction of The Briars. The red whiskers were still prominent, but some of the violence seemed to have left them. The man, clearly, was interested in the abnormal scene which his return had occasioned, but the distance was too great to determine whether his sentiment exceeded that of casual wonder. He waved a hand as he passed the Wilkes garage; then in time the car disappeared up the roadway, and Mrs. Baxter sank back against the wall with a sort of moan.

"That's what I call nerve," Mulvaney was the first of the group to find his voice. "Nerve, I call it."

"Maybe he's come back to give himself up." Mrs. Baxter probably expressed Mulvaney's unspoken sentiment, for the latter nodded sharply.

"And if you ask me," Mulvaney said, at no person in particular, "I'm going right up there."

"Possibly," Kairns suggested, somewhat coldly, "it might be as well to get in touch with your headquarters first. There is always a chance, you know, that you may have collected . . . I beg your pardon. . . . Thank you, Mrs. Baxter."

The latter departed.

". . . A chance," Kairns repeated, "that you may have collected your wits by the time you have telephoned. I would recommend it, Mulvaney, most highly."

"What the blazes are you driving at?" Mulvaney apparently was not in a mood for clear thought. "Hasn't Dunmore returned; and isn't that the reason he should be arrested at once?"

"I am merely trying to prevent you from making an ass of yourself," Kairns returned crisply; "a most con-

summate ass. If you cannot see at the moment that this eliminates Dr. Dunmore from all possible connection with either crime, then I am hoping your brain will be clearer after you have had a talk with headquarters."

Kairns sat down in the nearest chair, as though that were finished. Mulvaney glowered for a moment, then he turned away sharply. He returned in possibly a quarter of an hour, and the direction from which he approached indicated that he had taken a turn around a block.

"I still think we should go up to The Briars and see Dr. Dunmore," he said, in a voice more nearly normal, though there was still a suggestion of obstinacy.

"That is precisely why I am waiting for you," Kairns replied. "And if you don't mind, we will walk. It will give Dunmore a chance to settle down. It would undoubtedly have been of interest if we could have been there when the news of the Spencer murder was broken to him; but since that was out of the question it seems only fair that we should give him a chance to collect his thoughts. I presume he is having a difficult time of it right now; but the person who is having a much more difficult time is the murderer."

They walked for a couple of blocks in silence; and Burleigh seemed so stunned by the latest developments that no person could spare them more than a passing nod.

"You say Dunmore didn't do it?" Mulvaney broke the silence. "I must admit, Amor, that I may have formed a preconceived conviction. When Dunmore left this forenoon, it looked almost certain; and when he returned . . . the readjustment was a bit too sudden for me. I am willing to agree now that it is all in Dunmore's favour to think he returned. That was the first thing the Chief said, that it was ridiculous to think the man would return if he actually murdered the Spencer woman. But we know Cracksman X is a cold-blooded devil; though I couldn't say a word about that over the 'phone. If the Chief knew that part of it, he might not be so sure of himself."

Kairns listened politely, but did not answer. Again

there was silence. And again it was broken by Mulvaney, though only after they came within sight of The Briars.

"Confound it all, Amor." He attempted to be brusque, but failed. "I think you actually know who shot Hamstead and throttled Spencer."

"Do I?" Kairns evaded. "In that event, the point which now interests me is to know how we can obtain sufficient evidence to convince a jury. Perhaps, Captain, if you will concentrate on the original scene in the billiard-room, you may suggest some means by which we can obtain proof of events concerning which we only have a strong suspicion."

"We?" said Mulvaney. "I admit I did make a bit of an ass of myself a while ago; jumping at conclusions and things like that; but now that I have admitted it, who killed Hamstead?"

"Who?" Kairns replied. "I think, Captain, there must be a bit of Irish in your blood-stream. You are contrite now; but doubtless an hour from now you would resent the fact if I actually told you who killed Hamstead. So I will content myself with saying that if you give due thought to the various finger-prints located in the billiard-room, and couple them with other clues, you will have no difficulty in naming the murderer for yourself. And while you are doing that, may I be permitted to concentrate on some method of inducing the murderer to supply the sort of convincing evidence which all juries must have?"

"A full step behind you," Mulvaney mumbled; but they walked the rest of the distance in silence, and when they came within full view of The Briars it almost seemed that the rambling residence was deserted.

There was no person within sight, and a definitely dreary air appeared to have fallen over the place like a pall.

Yet Phipps met them at the doorway. The door actually opened before Kairns' finger reached the button.

"I expected this call," Phipps said in a hurried whisper. "I have taken the liberty of advising Dr. Dunmore to remain in his room. You will find him there." Then, in

a clear and well-carrying voice : "You wished to see Mrs. Madden, sir ? Thank you, sir."

Once inside the rotunda, the motive for Phipps' change of voice became obvious. Mrs. Madden was staring down upon them from the landing on the main stairway ; while others were dotted about the hall-way or were peering from the open doorways, wearing a tense air of expectancy.

Phipps led the way up the broad stairs, with barely a glance in either direction.

"Madame, the gentlemen really wished to speak to Dr. Dunmore," he announced, as he reached the landing, and his voice carried an air of finality. "I am taking the liberty of directing them."

Mrs. Madden shrank back, as though subdued by Phipps' manner.

The procession moved on, up the stairway, along the corridor to a door where Phipps knocked authoritatively.

Almost instantly Dunmore's red whiskers were thrust through the opening.

"They have arrived, sir," Phipps said, then backed away from the scene.

Dunmore pushed the door violently aside and gestured for Kairns and Mulvaney to enter. Then he closed it sharply behind them and stood for a time staring, much as Mrs. Madden had stared from the stairway landing.

"What a hell of a mess !" he finally broke out ; though both the tone of his voice and the poise of his red whiskers had lost their innate violence. "Won't you sit down ? Damn it all ; not enough chairs ? Well, I'll stand."

Dr. Dunmore had become a curious mixture ; though possibly he had been that from the first. There was a suggestion of inward seething ; but it was tempered by a realization of his dubious position, and that, in turn, seemed driven out by a touch of mockery.

Neither Kairns nor Mulvaney answered.

"Well," he said at length, when the situation became painful to him, "I suppose if you are like any of the fools in this confounded den, you have spotted me as the murderer."

Dr. Dunmore laughed harshly, though without suggestion of enjoyment.

"That would be quite simple, from surface reasoning," Kairns returned. "But possibly, under the circumstances, it would be well to tell us precisely what you did from the moment we left you on the lawn this forenoon until you stepped into Kingdon's car."

Dunmore laughed again, with the same inflection.

"Of course," he returned sharply, "I knew it. I knew I was a damned fool, for the things I said and the things I did; but I wouldn't have been a fool if somebody hadn't come along and murdered that woman. I knew, the minute I heard she had been choked to death, the way you had me sized up. And I can't say I blame you. But I'll tell you what I did. I started across the lawn, intending to give that woman a bit of my mind. Then she disappeared into the woods, and I slowed up my pace. Before I got to the edge of the woods I realized that I would only put myself in a compromising position, and probably play into her hands by following her; so I turned aside, and cut across the lawns to the garage. I found Kingdon there and asked him for his car. He said I could have it. So I stepped in . . . and that ends what you wanted to know."

"Why did you want the car at all?" Kairns asked; and the question astonished Dr. Dunmore.

"Good Lord, man!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say you believe me?"

"Isn't it true?"

"Of course it's true; but I didn't expect to be believed. Who could believe me under the circumstances?"

"Possibly we do," Kairns returned; and Dr. Dunmore stared at him through a period of perplexity.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "But, excuse me; I'm getting violent again, and I mustn't do that."

Again Dr. Dunmore stared for a time; then suddenly he began to pace rapidly about the room. At length he paused directly in front of Kairns.

"You're the most intelligent men I have ever en-

countered," he declared. "The ordinary person would have believed the evidence of his own eyes when he saw me start for those confounded woods. But you . . . ? Do you mean to say you have your fingers on the murderer?"

"Possibly," Kairns replied. "But if you are prepared for a shock, I don't mind telling you precisely why we believe your statement."

Dunmore squared his shoulders, and his red whiskers began to bristle again, as though he were regaining a firmer grip upon himself.

"I'm ready," he announced.

"You will possibly recall," Kairns went on ; "or, if you have not heard it before, I am informing you that there was a partly filled glass of rum on the table in the billiard-room directly in front of Roger Hamstead's dead body."

Kairns paused.

"No, I hadn't heard it," Dunmore declared.

"The position of the glass suggested most positively that it had been used by the murderer, since there was another glass in front of Hamstead. You have yourself indicated to us that you are fond of rum."

"Yes, I did," he admitted. "And I am."

"Very well, now here comes the interesting point: There were finger-prints on that glass."

Kairns paused ; and a slow wave of understanding crept over Dr. Dunmore's astonished countenance.

"You mean they were mine?" he demanded.

"You have it."

Dunmore gestured chaotically ; then he returned to his restless pacing. And again he paused in front of Kairns.

"My finger-prints on that glass," he said heavily. "And your evidence. You saw me starting across the lawn. How fortunate for me that you are intelligent men !"

"And if that, by chance, would not be enough to convince any jury," Kairns observed, "I would ask you, Doctor, to take a glance at the curtains at your back."

Dunmore swung about swiftly. He studied the swaying curtains for a time ; then he swung back again.

"I don't see anything," he said restlessly. "What have they to do with it?"

"Much. You will notice, if you look again, that the cord is missing from one of the curtains."

"Yes, it is," Dunmore agreed, after another glance.

"That cord," Kairns informed him, "was found about the throat of Daisy Spencer."

Dr. Dunmore seemed suddenly weak. He sat down upon the edge of the bed and began to stroke the creases which his weight made in the cover. When he looked up again his lips were trembling.

"I will never forget," he said thinly, "to thank the Lord for the gift of intelligence. That, with the others . . . I mean, all that evidence would be enough . . ."

He broke off with a shudder, and his red whiskers were literally drooping.

". . . Enough," Kairns rounded out the sentence, "to condemn any man in the eyes of any jury. Now we come, Doctor, to the reason why we have told you all this. The details, naturally, are between Captain Mulvaney and myself. . . ." Kairns glanced at Mulvaney, and the latter appeared startled for an instant, then he scowled. "Yes," Kairns repeated, "the details are between the Captain and myself. So it is enough for you to know, Doctor, that we are convinced that the glass bearing your finger-prints, which stood on the murder-table was a deliberate plant. Some person, at some time or other since your arrival at The Briars, had an opportunity to get possession of a glass which you had handled a little, but not much . . . and that is the glass."

Dr. Dunmore's whiskers showed some signs of returning to their bristling. The man's shoulders began to straighten once more, and he rose abruptly from the bed and smoothed away the creases which his body had made.

"I've been a weak ass," he said. "But just for a moment it bowled me over to know how near I had come to the electric chair . . . just on circumstances. All right, Mr. Kairns ; I see what you want me to do. If some cold-blooded

fiend got my finger-prints in the hope of planting the murder on me, very well . . . I'll figure this thing out. But I can't tell you now, for I don't know. I'm still a bit upset."

"Naturally," Kairns agreed. "And, Doctor, just for our satisfaction, would you mind returning to the point as to why you wanted Kingdon's car?"

"Why did I want it? Why? Because this hideous madhouse was getting on my nerves. I had to get away; that's all, somewhere—anywhere—it didn't matter where. I just had to get away from it for a time. So when Kingdon said I could have the car, I took it and drove like a fool. I don't know where I went, except that it was over the roads. I stopped at a village up the line and had some lunch; then I drove again. I stopped later and had dinner at Royalston. I was sane enough by that time to know where I was; but if I had to, I couldn't tell you the route I took. I just drove, that's all, and kept on driving. And it did me a world of good. By the time I got back here I was quite myself again. Anything else?"

Kairns shook his head.

"Nothing, except to get in touch with us the instant you recall the incident where some person had an opportunity to get your finger-prints on a glass. Remember, it could not have been at the dinner-table, for the servants must have removed the glass before any person could get possession of it. Of course, Doctor, we may not need your assistance at all; but we are asking it."

"And I'll be damned glad to give it," Dunmore returned, with a flash of animation.

"It pleases me," said Kairns, "to see that you are becoming your old self again."

Dr. Dunmore grinned, then he grasped both their hands with an outburst of emotion which did not seem to fit the particular shade of his whiskers.

Eventually they tore themselves away; and when Kairns glanced over his shoulder he saw that Dr. Dunmore was already pacing the floor in an effort at concentration of thought.

"You see, Captain," Kairns observed, as they passed down the long hallway, "what relief you have brought to Dr. Dunmore, simply because you are one of the most intelligent men he has ever encountered."

"If you make any more remarks like that," Mulvaney growled, "I'll call you an idiot."

They passed down the broad stairway, side by side ; and, if such a thing were possible, the scene which greeted them from the lower floor was even more tense than when they climbed the stairway in Phipps' shadow.

Kairns paused near the bottom step ; Mulvaney occupied a step higher up ; and both looked at the queer cluster of human beings. They were all there, from Horace Madden to Leander Augustini, from Jessie Burn to Tubby Sangster ; and queerly enough, it appeared they were astonished when they did not see Dr. Dunmore being led away between them. Yet no one spoke or made even a vague suggestion of breaking the silence of the tableau. They barely moved ; yet all eyes were turned anxiously in the direction of the stairway.

Amor Kairns glanced slowly about the full circle, and his gaze rested for an instant on each.

"Yes," he said in a voice which sounded hollow in the grim silence, "the murderer has revealed himself. Only one of you within sound of my voice will understand what I am about to say ; but to that one it should be enough. So, let me repeat . . . the murderer has revealed himself. The murderer of Roger Hamstead, who likewise was the murderer of Daisy Spencer, left his finger-prints behind him . . . in a place where he least expected to leave them. . . . *And it was not on the rum-glass.*"

Kairns stepped down and walked calmly through the tableau, with Mulvaney at his side. Phipps stepped forward and escorted them to the doorway ; and there he bowed while they passed through in silence, and made their way down the long driveway.

"That," said Kairns, at length, "must precipitate the crisis."

CHAPTER XXIX

"YES," said Amor Kairns approximately fifteen minutes later, as he occupied a comfortable chair on the verandah of the Orient Hotel, "I will be slightly disappointed if the murderer does not make a break for freedom some time during the next two or three hours. It is now quite dark. He must have a car, and his opportunity of acquiring one after midnight is so remote that I think we may count upon the break coming very shortly."

He was addressing Miss Mamie Fargo and Mrs. Baxter. Of the three, Kairns was the only one to be seated. Miss Fargo was shifting her weight restlessly from one foot to the other, as though chafing for action, while Mrs. Baxter's frequent glances over her shoulder in the direction of the hotel interior suggested that her mind was occupied with similar thoughts, though from a somewhat different angle.

"As you will appreciate, ladies," Kairns continued, "it would be wholly unethical to explain, at this moment, precisely what happened during our latest visit to The Briars, but circumstances have placed the murderer in such a peculiar position that he has only two alternatives. One would be to surrender quietly, which I do not expect, in view of his mentality; and the other would be to make a dash for freedom. . . . But must you go, Miss Fargo?"

"I have a duty to perform," said Mamie Fargo in a high-pitched voice. "Oh, I think you understand. I must inform Aunt Sarah Jane."

Mamie Fargo departed hurriedly, and the hungry glance which she ran up and down the street indicated that it could be only a matter of brief minutes before the ranks of Burleigh began to line up in the cause of justice. When Kairns glanced back, Mrs. Baxter had disappeared.

Shortly he detected her voice at the telephone ; so he sat back and waited patiently.

Mulvaney arrived in time.

The Captain dropped into a chair beside Kairns, mopped his brow, and tossed his hat carelessly upon the floor.

"I don't mind admitting, Amor," he said, "that I've had a hectic time of it. First, it took a bit of explaining with headquarters ; but that was mild, compared with trying to handle Deacon Jones. But the Deacon saw reason at last. There are a half-dozen guards posted all over The Briars grounds, but they're using their heads this time. Up trees, behind shrubs and things like that. And I think they're drilled into letting somebody start a breakaway if he wants to. How about you?"

Kairns leaned forward and glanced over the verandah railing.

"Miss Fargo," he replied, "is probably the most efficient recruiter I have ever known. It cannot possibly be more than a half hour since I made certain observations in her hearing, and she started out instantly to inform Aunt Sarah Jane ; you know, on account of her rheumatism. But she went up the street in the opposite direction, and if you look carefully, Captain, you will notice that she is only now passing down the street on the other side. I feel that Burleigh, at this moment, is a hot-bed of intrigue aimed at the murderer."

Mulvaney hesitated for a moment. He started a sentence, then broke it off.

"Oh, hang it !" he finally blurted out. "You have me trimmed again, so I'll humble myself, as usual, and ask : Who the blazes is the murderer ?"

"I think, Captain, I will let you figure that out for yourself," Kairns returned. "For, after all, apart from one point which may not be a hundred per cent perfect, it is really quite simple. The main key, of course, gets back to the wealth of clues which some person, or persons, left in the billiard-room on the night of Hamstead's murder ; coupled with the queer 'Spiff' message which we found in

Hamstead's pocket. As for the clues, Captain, possibly we should line them up. They are quite impressive, yet simple. One : Dr. Dunmore's finger-prints on the rum-glass. Two : Phipps' finger-prints on the second rum-bottle ; with the freshly opened rum-bottle wiped clean of all prints. Three : Kingdon's prints on the decanter of rye. Four : Lucy Jupp's prints on the murder-table. Five : Leander Augustini's prints on the french window. Six : Mrs. Madden's blood-stained handkerchief in the buffet. Seven : the fragment of pale-blue voile, later identified as part of a scarf owned by Jessie Burn, found in the metal-work of the murder-chair. Eight : the silencer, wiped clean of all prints. Nine—and this takes us outside the billiard-room—Horace Madden's revolver found in the woods. Ten : the 'Spiff' note found in Hamstead's pocket. Eleven : I almost forgot Tubby Sangster's cigarette-stubs.

"Naturally, Captain, when a person encounters a deluge of clues like that, the logical inference, after reflection, is that most of them, if not all—remember that phrase Captain, 'if not all'—were planted deliberately. That impression was already strong before the murderer slipped into Dunmore's room and removed the cord from the window-curtain to strangle Daisy Spencer. After that incident, the conviction became positive. So we have a situation through which most of the clues, if not all, were deliberately planted. For, Captain, we must realize that it would be fantastic in the extreme to say the murderer would appreciate the danger of leaving his prints on the silencer and yet not recognize the peril of leaving them on the rum-glass—that is, if he ever used the rum-glass. The answer, of course, is that he never used the rum-glass, except as the means of planting another clue.

"Now we may come down to a consideration of the various clues. The prints of Phipps and Lucy Jupp do not call for any discussion now, since we know their position in the case. As for the rest, one of the most curious was that crudely printed note found in Hamstead's pocket. On the surface, it aroused suspicion as to its sincerity ;

though its purpose, plainly, was to try to leave the impression that Hamstead was in league with some person inside The Briars, and that the evil association led to his death. But when we consider, Captain, that the letter was never delivered through the normal channels, and that, if delivered at all, it must have been through some secret letter-box, and that, despite that, it was still addressed to Roger Hamstead, what is the inference?"

Mulvaney stared for a moment at the tip of his cigarette.

"I guess I follow you," he returned. "The murderer planted it in Hamstead's pocket after the murder."

"Exactly," Kairns agreed. "And doubtless at the same time he removed anything which could have been in the least incriminating to himself. What does that suggest, Captain?"

"Hang it all, Amor. It suggests that Cracksman X was devilish cautious."

Kairns smiled.

"Just what I hoped you would say," he replied. "And on that basis there isn't the slightest need to go into a detailed discussion of all those other clues. If he wiped the silencer clean of all prints, and planted that note in Hamstead's pocket, as we have agreed, then most assuredly he wasn't stupid enough to overlook such obvious clues as Sangster's cigarette-stubs, Mrs. Madden's handkerchief, Jessie Burn's fragment of pale-blue voile, and the most incautious manner in which he disposed of Madden's plainly marked revolver. There is not the least use discussing them, Captain, for they all fall into the same category. So that leads us up to the most fascinating point in the whole case. Is it possible, Captain, that the murderer was shrewd enough to reason as we are now reasoning, and to say to himself that clues found against individuals would automatically give a clean sheet to all those against whom clues were found? And if he so reasoned, would he be clever enough to include a clue against himself? That, Captain, is one of the most interesting psychological studies which I have ever faced. It has been my major problem for some

hours, even after Dr. Dunmore's seeming flight. And yet . . . You were about to say something, Captain?"

Mulvaney denied it with a quick gesture.

"Please go on," he said. "I follow you exactly, and I am keeping out of it from now on."

"What a pity, Captain. For I was counting upon you to answer a critical question. I was hoping you would study those clues and inform me if there was any one of the number which was not obvious; which—shall we say?—might have been placed accidentally, and not deliberately."

"All right, I'll do it." Mulvaney drew the list from his pocket.

He pondered it for several minutes while Kairns seemed interested solely in the street traffic.

"For the love of heaven!" Mulvaney finally exclaimed. "I've got it now. It's as plain as the nose on your face; and you've been talking about it off and on ever since yesterday."

Kairns seemed highly pleased.

"So probably you will go on and thank me for permitting you to solve the identity of the murderer yourself. I think I observed once before that you would not thank me if I did not permit it. And now, may I ask, which is the fingerprint?"

Mulvaney considered it through another period of silence.

"Yes," he declared, "I stick to it. The print on the closed portion of the french window."

Amor Kairns sank back with a sigh of relief.

"Now that you have solved it," he said, "there is little more of interest. . . ."

"I'll be hanged if that isn't it," Mulvaney interrupted, as though he had not heard. "When we put those prints up against what Phipps told us about those french windows, it is as plain as a pikestaff. Sure enough, Amor, I see it all now. As Phipps told us, when a person pulls open the section of the french window which we found open, it always releases the other half. But we found the second

half closed. So the murderer automatically put up his hand and closed it, and left his prints behind him. Well, I'll be hanged! The only natural clue in the whole lot!"

"Precisely," Kairns returned. "And of course you heard me inform Augustini, in the presence of all the rest, that we had discovered a finger-print against him. You may not have observed it at the time, since the meaning of my remarks was not plain to you at the moment; but I stole a quick glance at Augustini, and if we required anything further to convince us, Captain, we had it in that instant; though it would be wholly useless for a jury. Leander Augustini's eyes blinked; and the gentleman—if it is fair to the rest of humanity to speak of him in such a term—was fully aware of the fact that I detected it. Well, Captain, practically all the rest is for you; though there is one point I would like cleared up."

"Good! I'll handle Augustini. What's your point?"

"Jasper Kingdon's somewhat peculiar conduct; his message to Simon Alvarez, and the latter's reply. I believe, Mul, the best way would be to put in a call for Kingdon and ask him to drop down here, but to be quite casual about it."

Mulvaney went directly to Central to put in the call, and when he returned it seemed that a slight doubt had crossed his mind.

"I don't want to pull down any of your structure, Amor," he said. "But it could be possible that Kingdon was hooked up with Augustini."

"Many things could be possible, but I doubt that. And yet, at the same time, I am somewhat disappointed in our murderer. Cracksman X has had a daring career, with successes all along the way up to this moment. His success has held for years, and that is the work of a lone wolf. For somehow criminals never do quite as well when they work in pairs or groups. But Kingdon will be down?"

"Yes," Mulvaney returned, "he said he would be down in a few minutes. He sounded a bit hipped over the 'phone; but I can't say that I blame him. Chances are he figures we

have picked on him. And if you'll excuse me, Amor, I think I will plant a few unoccupied cars along Burleigh's thoroughfares."

Mulvaney grinned.

"As a convenience?" Kairns asked.

"It all depends," Mulvaney returned. "If we have the right slant on affairs, and if Augustini is booked for an attempt at a getaway before midnight, I would say it wouldn't discourage him if he found a car handy. But we'll see what we see."

Mulvaney departed. Kairns continued to occupy the verandah of the Orient Hotel. Strangely enough, he had the space to himself. Occasional Burleigh citizens passed his way; but they did not appear to have time for more than a casual glance in his direction. They somehow managed to create the impression of intense activity; while the constant ringing of the telephone suggested another manner in which Burleigh's secret service was active.

A half hour later Jasper Kingdon sauntered down the main street, paused in front of the Orient Hotel, glanced up, then made his way up the steps indifferently, as though it were mere chance which had brought him there.

"Rather well done," Kairns complimented; and Kingdon seemed startled. His youthful countenance had lost some of its youthful lines; and despite his acting, he found it difficult to avoid glancing over his shoulders.

"What is well done?" he asked sharply.

"Your arrival."

Kingdon sat down abruptly in the chair next to Kairns.

"I thought you meant something else," he said. "But it doesn't matter now. What the blazes is wrong with this village? They shadowed me all the way from the gateway of The Briars."

"Then that wasn't well done," Kairns returned.

Deacon Jones drifted by. He glanced up shrewdly at Kairns, seemed satisfied, then moved on again. Two minutes later Mamie Fargo followed much the same procedure.

"Bloodhounds," said Jasper Kingdon. "Who are they trailing?"

"You're here, aren't you?" Kairns evaded.

"I suppose so; but they can follow every step I take, for all it matters to me. But you sent for me?"

That was a question.

"Yes. The fact of the matter is, Mr. Kingdon, that I would welcome the opportunity for a frank talk with you."

"Why with me?" Kingdon attempted a return to his youthful bravado; but most of his vitality seemed to have vanished. When Kairns did not answer directly, he played restlessly with an unlit cigarette.

"Surely, Mr. Kingdon," Kairns returned at length, "you pay a poor tribute to the instinct of curiosity. It is, you understand, one of the most positive of human traits. I am, accordingly, most interested in learning your connection with Simon Alvarez."

Kingdon half rose to his feet. If he had ever been a good actor, he had lost the gift.

"Damn it all!" he said.

"Precisely," Kairns returned. "We can, of course, learn much concerning Mr. Alvarez at our discretion. It is only a matter of calling at the address you placed on that telegram which you sent from Ridgeport this morning. Fact of the matter is, the Ridgeport police are already working on the matter, in conjunction with the New York force; but as I observed a moment ago, curiosity is a strong human characteristic, and I would prefer to have your version direct."

Jasper Kingdon lit the cigarette. He occupied much time in the process. Then he studied the burning tip; and for a time after that he pondered Amor Kairns.

"My compliments," he said, in the end. "I thought I covered my trail very well. But I see I am outclassed. What do you want to know about Alvarez?"

"Everything."

Kingdon considered Kairns again; and in the process the cigarette burned out.

"All right," he returned, with a sudden shrug of his shoulders. "Perhaps I should have told you in the first place ; I don't know. But a person is always supposed to exercise his judgment. If I had been positive, I would have told you . . . but since most of it was only imagination, I just didn't. But now . . ."

Jasper Kingdon did not make further progress with that sentence, for another period of turmoil broke out in Burleigh.

Mrs. Baxter dashed from the rear of the hotel, screaming as she went :

"The break has come ! The break has come !"

She rushed down the steps to the street, and almost instantly, as though a flare had gone up, she spread the call to arms.

CHAPTER XXX

BURLEIGH's turmoil was positive, but short-lived. Under normal circumstances, Augustini's attempt at a breakaway might have counted upon a reasonable chance of success. But conditions were far from normal. It was Mamie Fargo who first saw him walk calmly from a side street and step into one of the cars which Mulvaney had so thoughtfully parked for his convenience.

Miss Fargo's temperament instantly took command of the situation. The hue and cry was on almost before Augustini had pressed the starter. Possibly it was the confusion of Mamie Fargo's preliminary attack which made him take the wrong turning; possibly it was lack of familiarity with the geographical conditions of Burleigh; but the fact remains that, with his first turning off the main thoroughfare, Augustini ran directly into a blind street. He crashed the car into an obstructing board fence; and it was Deacon Jones who enjoyed the distinction of first arriving upon the scene.

When the Deacon arrived, with Chief Thompson possibly a dozen paces in the rear, Augustini was extracting himself painfully from the wreckage. It has always been a matter of dispute as to which, Deacon Jones or Chief Thompson, grasped the opportunity to play the heroic role. Even Burleigh, so efficient in other matters, has never been able to solve the problem as to which knocked the revolver from Augustini's hand. Both claimed the honour; and though a special meeting of the village council was called on the following day in the hope of arriving at a fitting solution, the matter was never decided. At any rate, that solved the mystery as to where the silencer had originated, for Augustini's weapon bore its clear imprints.

The trial, conviction, and execution of Augustini are

merely matters of criminal record. If any person cares for the details, Captain Mulvaney will doubtless be glad to produce them ; for he kept all the newspaper clippings of the trial, and he seemed to take a secret satisfaction in the fact that few of the preliminary events of the chase ever found their way into print.

There is only one other point which matters. That was cleared up an hour or so after Augustini was finally placed under guard in Dr. Thorley's office. For Jasper Kingdon met Kairns and Mulvaney on the verandah of the Orient Hotel and resumed his statement at the point where it had been broken by Mrs. Baxter's dramatic outburst.

"I can talk more freely now," Kingdon began, after Mulvaney passed the cigarettes. "Up to the time of Augustini's attempt to escape, it was probably fifty per cent imagination on my part. Now I feel I can speak with conviction. But where should I begin?"

"Just where you please," Kairns assured him.

"Then I suppose it gets back to the point where I first met Augustini in Washington and heard his story of Spanish treasure. I thought he was connected with the diplomatic service. So matters, as you know, took their course up to the point where I proposed the expedition to Jessie Burn, and where she passed along the idea to Mrs. Madden. Augustini, naturally, had to be invited. I think that came about because he suggested he would like to get back to Honduras for a time. Horace Madden thinks Augustini tried to call off the whole plan. He is wrong there, though that does not matter. Possibly the only thing which matters now is that I accepted Augustini as genuine until perhaps a half hour after word of the Hamstead murder was spread about. I cannot tell you precisely why I began to doubt him. It was because of a score of little things ; the way he spoke, his attitude, his mere gestures—little things, too trifling to put into words, yet each contributing to my doubt of him. So that is where Simon Alvarez comes into it. Alvarez happens to be a gambling friend of mine with wide connections. He

runs a gambling house in New York ; has several others scattered over the country. I had told him of the proposed Honduras trip, purely in a friendly way, and he asked me to look into the situation when I went to Honduras and see if there were opportunities to start a branch down there. We both accepted Augustini as genuine, for he had posed as a relative of a government official in Honduras. We had no reason to doubt him until, as I have said, the Hamstead murder changed him in countless little ways.

"So when I began to doubt, I wrote Alvarez a long letter and caught the noon mail the day after the murder. You are wondering, of course, why I followed with a telegram this morning?"

"We are wondering, possibly, at the wording of the telegram," Kairns returned. "I believe you informed Alvarez that the situation had become intensely critical."

"I did ; and it had. The situation became more critical because Augustini seemed to change still more as the day went on. You recall that you found us playing tennis. Well, Augustini gave me the greatest battle he ever gave me. That astonished me. Then later, through the evening, we played Bridge. He was completely off his game, so badly off that I did not have the slightest difficulty scoring thousands of points on him. That carried me beyond astonishment. It left me amazed. I was as certain then as I could reasonably be, without having a single clue to go on, that he had a hand in that Hamstead murder. I had, of course, asked Alvarez to check through Honduras on Augustini's connections with the government official he named as a relative. That was in the letter. But when Augustini became quite a different person in my eyes because of that Bridge game, I began to think of him as I had never thought before. I recalled details of our meeting . . . you know, and all the rest of it . . . the months I had known him . . . and I suddenly realized that I didn't have a thing to go on, except his own word, to prove who or what he was. Our association had grown up gradually and naturally ; many things were taken

for granted. I had accepted him ; that was all. But when doubt began to function, my whole picture of the man changed. I didn't sleep much last night. I was tracing our association, step by step. And this morning it seemed I simply must force Alvarez into quick action. So I took that mad dash to Ridgeport and sent the telegram. That is about all."

Kingdon threw out a hand with a gesture of relief.

"Yes," Kairns agreed, "I think it is nearly all that is necessary. But purely for the honour of Burleigh, would you mind answering one more question?"

"Glad to," Kingdon declared.

"It was Mrs. Baxter who arrived at the conclusion, after consultation with Miss Mamie Fargo and Aunt Sarah Jane," Kairns smiled, "that your mad dash to Ridgeport, as you call it, was timed at an early hour this morning for the specific reason of concealing from The Briars the fact that you had been away at all—that, as Mrs. Baxter expressed it, you were more afraid of some person at The Briars than you were of the police."

Jasper Kingdon considered that through a moment of silence.

"And it was Miss Fargo who first spotted the breakaway," he nodded his agreement. "A remarkable people, Mr. Kairns."

"A most remarkable people, Mr. Kingdon."

"Most remarkable," Captain Mulvaney echoed.

"That is almost too nice of you for words," said a voice at their backs ; and when all three swung about sharply, Mrs. Baxter waved at them gracefully from a partly open window. "I must tell Mamie Fargo this minute."

A moment later they heard her at the telephone.



M.H. 2/2/45

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